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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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House of Commons

Thursday 30 March 2023

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

9.34 am

Mr Speaker: In February, I announced to the House that Sir John Benger, the current Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons service, will be leaving Parliament in the autumn to take up the role of Master of St Catherine's College, Cambridge. I am pleased to announce that, following a competitive recruitment process, Tom Goldsmith, the current Principal Clerk of the Table Office, has been appointed as the 52nd Clerk of the House of Commons, following the approval of His Majesty the King. I am sure that you will join me in congratulating Tom, who has many outstanding qualities to bring to this important role and will be a distinguished successor to Sir John Benger.

Arrangements will be made for a comprehensive handover period before Tom formally takes up the role in October. Until then, Sir John will continue to work hard and diligently as Clerk of the House—he has a lot of work to do! There will also be an opportunity before then for colleagues to recognise more formally Sir John's historic contribution to the House and to wish him all the very best in the future.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rural Farmers and Communities

1. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support the mental wellbeing of farmers and other members of rural communities. [904404]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The Department's farm welfare forum brings together England's largest farming welfare organisations, many of which provide excellent mental health support. In October last year we opened the third phase of our future farming resilience fund. It provides free expert business advice to farmers and supports mental health and wellbeing where appropriate.

Dr Evans: We know that farmers are among those at the highest risk of suicide. In light of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry on rural community mental health, and the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution report on mental health in farming, what more can we do to support the mental wellbeing of our rural communities and farmers?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in this area. DEFRA supports community action to tackle loneliness in rural areas via our ongoing funding of Action with Communities in Rural England, and initiatives that address the mental health impacts of social isolation. We have worked with the Yellow Wellies charity to provide advice and information to delivery partners on how to identify potential mental health issues, and tools for addressing them. We also regularly bring together rural community organisations to look into issues around transport connectivity and community in a rural context.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mental illness among farmers is greatly increasing across the whole United Kingdom. Rural Support has revealed that hundreds of farmers in Northern Ireland are suffering from mental health issues. What discussions has the Minister had with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs back home in relation to additional support for our farmers? We could deal with issue this better together across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we always have conversations with our colleagues across devolved Administrations. As he identifies, this is a very important issue. Together, we can encourage conversations and support through various charities. Of course, the Government will play their part in those conversations and in supporting of those charities.

Illicit Fur Trade

2. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle the illicit fur trade. [904405]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): We currently restrict imports of fur and fur products from cats and dogs, fur from wild animals caught using non-compliant trapping methods, and fur from endangered species. We will continue to enforce those restrictions very strongly.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The Government have boasted of their world-leading record on animal welfare, but they have done nothing to tackle the abhorrent global trade in fur. The last Labour Government banned fur farming in the United Kingdom. Having dropped the planned animals abroad Bill, will the Government commit to introducing legislation to ban the import and sale of fur, and end this country's involvement in the global fur trade?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Gentleman is correct: fur farming has been banned since 2000 in England and Wales and since 2002 in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We published a formal call for evidence on the fur trade, and we received around 30,000 responses, which we are currently considering, but we have an incredibly strong record with our plan for animal welfare.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The global trade in fur costs millions of animals their lives every year. The Government's call for evidence on the fur market in Great Britain closed in June 2021. I thank the Minister for telling us how many responses there were, but since then, there has been no word from the Department on whether the ban on the import and sale of fur will be introduced. Over three quarters of voters support a ban on fur imports. When will the results of the call for evidence be published, so that this country can see what experts really think and we can legislate? Does she agree that fur is best on the back of the animal, not on the back of a human?

Trudy Harrison: We have committed to exploring potential action in relation to animal fur, as set out in the action plan for animal welfare. We have conducted the call for evidence, and we continue to build on our evidence base on the fur sector, which will be used to inform any future action on the fur trade.

Teesside Sea Life

3. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to determine the cause of the die-off of crustaceans and other sea life off the Teesside coast. [904407]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Following a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs-led multi-agency investigation last year, I commissioned a further review, which reported in January, regarding the issue that affected crustaceans. It ruled out some of the prevailing theories, including the role of pyridine, and the view of the independent expert panel was that finding something to which we can attribute the cause with certainty is unlikely. However, we have continued to monitor this. In Hartlepool this month there have been anecdotal reports of sudden drops in the number of prawns and Norway lobster. The scale is unknown, but the Centre for Environment Fisheries and Aquaculture Science has undertaken precautionary sampling and testing for disease and pathogens.

Alex Cunningham: When 11-year-old Erin-Rose Cawley from Redcar was asked to write a speech for school, she wrote:

> "The year is 2019 and our beaches have just received the Blue Flag meaning our beaches are some of the country's best. Fast forward two years to beaches knee deep in dead, twitching crabs—a die off that was a never before seen phenomenon."

Will the Minister tell Erin-Rose what the Government are going to do to ensure our dead sea is brought back to good health?

Dr Coffey: CEFAS has not received any reports of similar crab or crustacean mortality events since what happened in 2021, and a significant review—*[Interruption.]* A significant review has been undertaken already. I really do not think it is in the best interests to continue to challenge expert scientists who have undertaken that review and ruled out the theory that the hon. Gentleman has been pushing for some time now.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I sat with fishers a few weeks ago, alongside my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), to hear about the impact that the Teesside crustacean die-off has had on the livelihoods of local fishers. Let me tell the Secretary of State what they said:

> "We're finished. There's nothing left to catch."
>
> "No-one listens. We're just fishermen!"
>
> "We're not asking for a handout. We're asking for a roadmap to get back on track."
>
> "Levelling up? They've levelled Teesside down".

Working people—the grafters of this country and the foundation of our food security—are being ignored. It is wrong that public figures, instead of stepping up like true public servants, are acting like Houchen's henchmen and pound-shop goons, closing down debate and legitimate challenge. Well, it will not work—this is not going away. Will the Secretary of State take a different course and meet Stan Rennie and the North East Fishing Collective with me to finally get to the bottom of this and give them the answers they deserve?

Dr Coffey: I am really disappointed by that. The shadow Secretary of State has basically impugned the integrity of the chief scientific adviser of DEFRA.

Alex Cunningham: No he did not!

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman has just, with his words, done that, and I am really concerned about that. This issue is very important. That is why we undertook a further independent review. The chief scientific adviser of DEFRA brought in more people.

The shadow Secretary of State talks about the people who are affected, and I understand that. The impact is such that the fishermen are having to go out to about 9 miles compared with the normal 2 to 3 miles. The inshore fisheries and conservation authority has reported to the Department that there is no particular change in the levels in that area. I am conscious that that may not be the impact for those individuals there. I have met other MPs in the area, and there are funding opportunities available, which might be for reinvestment in equipment to help them go further afield more regularly.

Jim McMahon: Will she meet with them?

Dr Coffey: I do not need to meet with them, because there has already been investigation into this, and the role is to make sure we do what we can to support the fishermen, including through the seafood fund and the fisheries and seafood scheme, which is now open.

Flooding: Funding

4. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): When she plans to announce details of funding for frequently flooded areas. [904408]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): In July 2022, the Government announced their £100 million frequently flooded fund to support communities that have experienced repeated flooding but have been unable to secure all of the funding necessary to progress their schemes. My hon.

Friend will be pleased to hear that his scheme has been approved, and full details will be with him and all those involved in his scheme in Shipley next week.

Philip Davies: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for that. She will know that I lobbied hard for the establishment of this frequently flooded fund for my constituents who regularly get flooded but never met the previous criteria. Clearly, I await next week's announcement with great anticipation, but if not every part of my constituency has been successful in that bid, can the Minister confirm that this is not a one-off fund but an annual fund, and that any area that misses out this time might have an opportunity to be successful in future rounds?

Rebecca Pow: Yes, my hon. Friend was a doughty campaigner in raising this issue of frequently flooded communities. As I went around the country when communities unfortunately experienced flooding, it was clear that a number of those communities fell out of being able to access the funding, so I assure him that £20 million is going out in this first tranche. Letters will be sent out shortly, with further details next week. This money—this particular £100 million—has been ringfenced, and I give all credit to my hon. Friend for the part he played in highlighting this issue.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister will know that one way of preventing flooding downstream in urban areas is to try to deal with natural watercourses: rewinding, planting more trees and so on. There are other nature-based solutions that would be appropriate in Somerset, which she is very familiar with. Could she tell us what the Department is doing to try to introduce some of those solutions?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that question, which touches on so many parts of DEFRA's portfolio: tackling flooding, water quality, biodiversity—we can get all of that by re-meandering rivers. The Environment Agency has already spent £15 million on natural flood management schemes. There is a lot of work going on, and indeed, natural flood management schemes can be part of applications for the frequently flooded fund.

Rural Communities

5. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): What steps she is taking to support rural communities. [904409]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): We want to ensure that rural areas and the people living within them are absolutely given the opportunity to flourish. We are supporting rural businesses in communities with £5 billion of Project Gigabit funding and £1 billion of shared rural network funding. We are improving their connectivity to make sure that rural areas thrive.

Andrew Bridgen: The new national forest has been of huge benefit to both my former coalmining communities and my rural communities in North West Leicestershire, to the point where many of the villages and communities just outside the forest would like to be part of it. Could the Minister give her advice on this matter?

Trudy Harrison: What a tree-mendous question! Trees have transformed that previously scarred landscape, and I assure my hon. Friend that I also appreciate the lungs of Leicestershire, creating 200 square miles of forest. Some 9 million people visit that area and 5,000 jobs have been created, as have 100 km of cycling tracks. My hon. Friend sets me a challenge, which I relish: I will certainly look into how we can continue to expand the National Forest Company.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Christopher Bryant.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you for the email you just sent to us all, which announces that the new Clerk of the House is going to be Tom Goldsmith. I am grateful to have the opportunity to be the first to congratulate him.

Mr Speaker: You missed the statement!

Sir Chris Bryant: Oh, I missed the statement—I am terribly sorry. I am useless; resign instantly. Anyway, I am congratulating him.

It is very important that rural communities look like rural communities. One of the things that we did in the 1945 Labour Government was to insist that people could not put advertising hoardings up along motorways outside towns. Unfortunately, lots of farmers these days are wheeling advertising hoardings along by motorways, which is dangerous for drivers on motorways. Is it not time that we put a stop to it?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Gentleman raises a technical question. I am happy to liaise with my colleagues in the Department for Transport on that particular matter, and I will write to him with a response.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): According to a rural Scottish business panel survey last month, the impact of the cost of living is damaging rural Scottish businesses, with almost nine out of 10 having financial concerns and three quarters postponing investment plans due to cost increases. Despite what the Minister has said earlier, can she tell me what additional support she can provide to support rural communities struggling with higher costs?

Trudy Harrison: There is a plethora of support, particularly around energy with the household support fund and including from my colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade—the artist formerly known as BEIS. Surely the hon. Lady has seen the announcement this morning on how we are supporting the transition to green energy, too, which will benefit constituents not only in Scotland, but right around the UK.

Public Access to Nature

6. **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): What steps she is taking to improve public access to nature. [904410]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): Connectivity to rural areas is vitally important to us. As I have

already set out this morning, we are spending millions on ensuring that rural areas thrive and that people have access to nature.

Caroline Lucas: As the Minister knows, goal 10 of the environmental improvement plan is to enhance engagement with the natural environment. Saving historic footpaths is a vital way of doing that, so it is a bit bizarre, given there is already a backlog of more than 4,000 applications waiting to be processed to save those footpaths, that the Government have reneged on their promise to scrap the deadline in the mapping review, without any plan to address that backlog. Will the Minister rethink that short-sighted decision, so that we do not risk losing 40,000 miles of precious footpaths forever?

Trudy Harrison: Actually, that decision was taken in 2000, and we have extended the date from 2026 to 2031. I remind the hon. Member of the measures that we are taking to improve access to nature with Natural England and the commitment for people to be within 15 minutes of a blue or green area, as well as with the national trails and the designation of the coast to coast as a national trial. The England coastal path is 2,700 miles around England that people can access. In fact, people can access most coastal, common, fell, moorland and heathland areas across the country, but there is a balance between access for the public, the protection of nature and ensuring that the lives of people in rural areas and their livelihoods thrive.

Air Quality

7. **Jane Hunt** (Loughborough) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve air quality. [904411]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Air pollution has fallen significantly since 2010, and our recently published environmental improvement plan sets out the actions that we will continue to take to continue to improve air quality. They include additional measures to tackle domestic burning and agricultural emissions, continued delivery of the £883 million NOx programme and supporting local authorities to improve air quality more quickly with clear guidance and tools.

Jane Hunt: The Minister will know that I am really referring to incinerators in my particular instance. The Government have taken steps to improve air quality through the Environment Act 2021. One of the targets is to have an annual mean concentration for $PM_{2.5}$ levels of 10 micrograms per cubic metre or below by 2040. When determining these targets, the Government considered the World Health Organisation's own target, which was 10 micrograms per cubic metre. However, it has recently lowered that to 5 micrograms per cubic metre. Will the Government consider lowering their target, so that it is in line with the WHO?

Rebecca Pow: The simple answer is no. Clearly we look at all the World Health Organisation guidelines, but they are only there to inform the setting of standards; they are not ready-made targets. Being realistic, even without man-made emissions and all the measures we have set forward in our groundbreaking targets, $PM_{2.5}$ concentrations would still exceed the WHO guidelines—even the lower one—because we get these emissions from natural sources and also from other countries. The WHO guidelines would therefore be unachievable. I was heartened by my recent visit to Sweden to launch the Forum for International Co-operation on Air Quality, which shows we have to work together on this internationally.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, has just issued a report, with 15 recommendations, that gives a route map on how to achieve these targets earlier, including on indoor air pollution and wood burners. Will the Minister respond to that now, write in greater detail to me as the chair of the all-party group on air pollution, and come to a meeting to explain what progress the Government can make on these 15 objectives, so that we can make faster progress and save more lives sooner?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Member for that. I have met him many times on these issues, and I commend him for this work, but I have also met Professor Chris Whitty on this very subject. The hon. Member just needs to look at the forthcoming update of our clean air strategy. We are already working on many of the things that Chris Whitty has raised, and we have to get the Department of Health and Social Care to play its part as well.

Rural Farmers

8. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps she is taking to support rural farmers. [904412]

11. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What steps she is taking to support rural farmers. [904417]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): Agriculture is a devolved issue, and is the responsibility of the Scottish Government. Our farmers produce some of the best food in the world. In England, our environmental land management schemes are now open for them to access, and we will pay farmers to deliver positive environmental outcomes. We will also support the production of great British food, healthier soils and more pollinators.

Jamie Stone: For the record, may I say how surprised and disappointed I was that the lady who was offered the Rural Affairs job in the Scottish Government turned it down because, as it is reported, it was seen to be a demotion? I was born on a farm. My local farmers and crofters are vital to the economy of my constituency. All over the UK, it is about feeding the nation.

On the subject of feeding the nation, there is increased movement of cattle from Scotland to England. I will not go into the reasons why that is happening, but it is happening, and the Minister will know that. Does he agree that a universal electronic tagging scheme that matches the whole of the UK, perhaps including Northern Ireland, would greatly facilitate this sort of sale of livestock?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Member for his question. Obviously, I work closely with Mairi Gougeon in the Scottish Government. She will probably be disappointed

to have been re-offered her job, despite its being offered to somebody else, but we will continue to have a positive working relationship there.

The hon. Member is right to highlight the fact that co-operation across the Union is best for UK agriculture and best for UK food production. I think systems for moving cattle between Scotland and England need to flow as quickly and as easily as possible, so that that marketplace works efficiently for farmers on both sides of the border.

Wendy Chamberlain: I recently visited the Quaker Oats site in my constituency, which works very hard with a number of local farmers who provide the site and, outwith North East Fife, works hard on LEAF—Linking Environment and Farming—accreditation, providing sustainability initiatives for local farmers, but they are frustrated. In his answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), the Minister mentioned the importance of working across the UK and wider sustainability initiatives in the supply chain, such as the extended producer responsibility scheme, so will the Minister provide an update on that scheme and will he commit to re-engaging so that, on a UK basis, we can provide that support?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Member for that question. Again, she highlights how important this is. I think farming is challenging enough, frankly, without our putting false barriers in place across the border between England and Scotland. We need to co-operate across the Union and make sure that farmers and food producers on both sides of the border have the opportunity to access the market without barriers.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, the west Pennine moors have a lot of tenant farmers. Does the Minister share my concern that we are seeing an increasing use of mandatory rounds in relation to development, often for solar or tree planting, to break both business farm tenancies and agricultural tenancies that have inheritance attached to them? If he does share that concern, what is the Department going to do about it?

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. We have been working with Baroness Rock, who has been doing a review of farm-based tenancies, and we will respond to that review very soon. We want to support tenants up and down this country, particularly in Cumbria, and I hope to visit that part of the country in the very near future to see at first hand what is happening on those hills.

Mr Speaker: We look forward to welcoming you.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall that my constituents Andy and Lynda Eadon have done tremendous work in raising awareness of the mental health challenges affecting young farmers in particular in rural areas, in memory of their son Len. Can I thank him for agreeing to participate in the Westminster leg of the Len's Light tractor relay? Mr Speaker, he is perhaps the only Minister you will allow to drive a tractor anywhere near this historic building. Can I urge him to continue to apply pressure to land-based colleges and other educational institutions to make sure that mental health awareness is part of the educational experience of everyone entering agriculture?

Mr Speaker: So long as it's a red tractor.

Mark Spencer: That, actually, Mr Speaker, is a very important issue: "If it's not red, leave it in the shed" is what I would say.

I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend's constituents for their support of mental health charities, particularly in memory of Leonard. He has been a huge inspiration to young farmers, certainly across the east midlands, in talking about mental health challenges in that industry.

Sewage Discharge

9. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on reducing sewage discharges. [904413]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We have asked water companies to deliver their largest ever infrastructure investment, £56 billion over 25 years. Nearly 800 improvements are under way already, and that is dealing with storm sewage overflows. The Secretary of State and I have asked sewage companies to come up with an action plan for every single storm overflow in England, and water companies will face higher penalties, to be enforced and paid more quickly than ever before. Under Labour the monitoring record of storm sewage overflows was woeful, but by the end of this year it will be 100%.

Liz Twist: Labour does have a plan—a much more ambitious plan—to tackle combined sewer overflows, and this would include cutting discharges by 90%, mandatory sewage outlet monitoring, and automatic fines for discharges. Will the Secretary of State enact that plan with immediate effect?

Rebecca Pow: I am glad the hon. Lady has asked me that, because her plan would add £1,000 on to every customer's bill and we would have to add pipes that would go two and a half times around the world to cope with what Labour is proposing. We are already doing everything that has been called for, and more: we are increasing fines; we are increasing monitoring; we are taking tougher sanctions on businesses; and we have a costed plan and are mindful of the impact on customers.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Investment has already seen an over-50% reduction in storm overflows in North Devon, resulting in bathing water quality being rated good or excellent along the coast. However, this is only tested between May and September. Will my hon. Friend consider extending the testing season for the increasing number of all year round bathers and surfers, or at least look for waters to be tested after a storm overflow has discharged?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is a great voice for her constituency in this area and I am very pleased to hear about those figures for the improving water. We are using powers in the Environment Act 2021, and under them we require companies to make discharge data

available to the public in near real time if there has been a discharge that could have affected water quality, and to monitor water quality upstream and downstream of their assets. This monitoring will be all year round and will come into force at the end of this year, and all water companies will also have to install new flow monitors on more than 2,000 wastewater treatment works.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Tory sewage scandal is a national disgrace. The waters that run through our communities, the seas that millions look out to, and the quality of life and livelihoods have been turned into an open sewer. The Tory plan means discharges will continue to 2050, 27 years away, and even then there is no delivery plan, and we do not know which communities will benefit first and which could be waiting for decades, whereas our plan will see systematic dumping ended by 2030. Over the weekend *The Times* reported new data showing 800 discharges every day. Is the Secretary of State familiar with those figures, and if so, given that the Environment Agency has said it will publish by midday tomorrow, will she make a statement to the House before it rises for Easter today?

Rebecca Pow: I will honestly say that a lot of the—*[Interruption.]* Well, I am not sure they are facts. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let's carry on with the answer to the question.

Rebecca Pow: Thank you, Mr Speaker. A lot of what we are hearing is disingenuous and misleading the public. The plan, as I have just—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must think about what we say, and I am sure the Minister would love to withdraw what she has just said.

Rebecca Pow: I will definitely withdraw that, Mr Speaker, but we do have to be careful about what we say to the public, and I have pointed out that the so-called plan the Labour party has put forward is thoroughly unworkable in the cost it would put on the public, the time it would take and the amount of pipes that would be required. It would involve digging up the entire nation, whereas we have a completely costed plan: it is very clear, and we have set targets on when these storm overflow monitors have to be in place—by the end of this year—and all the work on the storm overflow plans must be delivered to the Secretary of State and me forthwith. So we are definitely on top of this like never before.

Topical Questions

T1. [904422] **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am pleased to say that today, alongside the launch of our net zero strategy, we are launching the nature markets framework. We need a healthy and thriving natural environment to meet our net zero goals and build our resilience to climate change. The announcement today on the investment we are seeking, alongside the £4 million we will use to boost that private finance, sends a signal that the opportunities for investing in our farmland, forestry, peatlands and marine areas are great and can offer long-term rewards for both people and nature.

Justin Madders: We are very proud that the Canal & River Trust has its headquarters in Ellesmere Port, but like everyone else it has been struggling with increasing costs relating to covid and energy. It is waiting for an answer from the Government about what will happen with its grant funding, so will the Secretary of State give us a date by which a decision will be made and guarantee there will be no cuts to its grant funding?

Dr Coffey: I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but I missed the name of the company the hon. Gentleman referred to. As he will know, support has been provided in different ways to all businesses with regard to energy costs.

T4. [904425] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Insect protein is increasingly being pushed on social media as an alternative food, despite concerns about contamination. Will my right hon. Friend outline how the Government intend to label this type of protein, so that consumers can make informed decisions?

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): Food is assessed before it is allowed to be placed on the UK market, and that assessment includes whether it is safe. As with any other food, any producer has to be registered with its local food authority to meet strict food safety requirements. Food derived from or including insect protein must be properly labelled, with ingredients clearly indicated and any warnings, such as the presence of allergens, included on the label.

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

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Last night, Abi Kay of *Farmers Weekly* posted a piece detailing allegations of a major fraud in the meat processing sector. Her investigation revealed that

"up until at least the end of 2020, a food manufacturer was passing off huge quantities of foreign pork—sometimes tens of thousands of tonnes a week—as British",

as well as passing potentially unfit food into the food chain. We had hoped that Ministers might make a statement this morning to reassure the public. In the absence of that, will the Minister tell the House what action he is taking, how often he has met representatives of the meat processing sector in the last month, and whether he is confident that adequate whistleblowing and trade union representation structures are in place to ensure that such malpractices cannot go undetected?

Mark Spencer: As the hon. Gentleman indicates, this is a very important issue. We have not made a statement today because there is an ongoing criminal investigation. I do not want to jeopardise that criminal investigation, because these are very serious allegations. The Food Standards Agency has responsibility in this area. I met the chair of the FSA last week. I continue to meet representatives of the meat industry—I met them this

month and do so on a regular basis. We will keep a close eye on the investigation and leave it to the FSA to deliver criminal prosecution.

T6. [904428] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Some people particularly want to buy halal and kosher meat and some people particularly do not want to buy halal and kosher meat, so will the Government ensure that it must be properly labelled at the point of sale, so that people who particularly want to buy it or particularly do not want to buy it are able to make an informed decision?

Mark Spencer: The fundamental principle of food labelling rules is that information provided to consumers must not mislead. Based on evidence provided from a 2021 call for evidence on food labelling for animal welfare, we are still considering how to move forward.

T2. [904423] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): Earlier this week, the Secretary of State said that she likes information and facts, so here are a few statistics for her: the Dogs Trust alone has cared for 250,000 illegally imported puppies. If sold, those puppies would have netted £3 million for criminals. More than 40,000 people have written to the Government asking them to fulfil their manifesto commitment and pass the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill. Will she tell me how many more days they will have to wait for an answer?

Dr Coffey: My first rescue dog was from the Dogs Trust, which is a very important charity. On animal welfare, the hon. Lady will be aware of our good record, including Bills that have been going through this place. Business managers are aware of the manifesto commitments that we want to fulfil, and they are in charge of scheduling Government business. The Leader of the House will announce business in the usual way.

T7. [904429] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Minister explore with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities the implications for national parks of proposals to extend permitted development rights to pop-up campsites?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): Yes, I absolutely will. I understand the proportionality required on this issue to protect nature and improve the lives and livelihoods of people living in protected landscapes.

T3. [904424] **Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Wakefield suffers from the second and third most polluted rivers in England. I was really concerned by reports this week that the Environment Agency still does not have a full-time team dealing with this crisis. It is clear that the Government are all talk. This is not a part-time issue, so when will the Government finally give this crisis the dedicated attention that it desperately needs?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is right to be concerned about the quality of rivers. The Environment Agency is funded through its licensing in order to do the necessary inspections. The Government increased the amount of money available to the Environment Agency to undertake criminal investigations. He should be aware that there is a live criminal investigation right now into water companies and what is happening to sewage.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I was appalled to read in this week's *Farmers Weekly* that food labelled as British has actually come from South America or even Africa, and that meat not fit for human consumption has been going into the food chain. The Food Standards Agency's report makes it clear that it has been misled and hoodwinked by these operators. Is there a case to bring the FSA within DEFRA rather than the Department of Health and Social Care, where it is now?

Dr Coffey: The Select Committee Chair is right that the *Farmers Weekly* has provided an interesting investigation.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Did you read it?

Dr Coffey: As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries said, the investigation is under way. It is true that the Food Standards Agency is a non-ministerial Department and is accountable to the Department for Health and Social Care, but as my right hon. Friend said, there is active engagement. The machinery of government change that Select Committee Chair proposes is of interest, and I will consider it with the Prime Minister.

I would like to add that in my comments to the Select Committee the other day, I said that I do not read editorials in some of the magazines. I really enjoyed the article in this week's *Farmers Guardian* about Angus herd fuel efficiency gains of 41p per kilo, and in *Farmers Weekly* about the trials of replacing insecticides, a Scottish pilot that was very interesting indeed.

T5. [904427] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): When my constituents do their food shopping they are faced with price increases of between 10% and 15%, or even more, compared with last year. But farmers in my consistency are certainly not getting paid 10% or 15% more for their produce—they are lucky to even get paid the same as last year. If the farmers who produce the food are getting ripped off, and the customers who eat the food are getting ripped off, who is doing the ripping off? What are the Government going to do to stop it?

Mark Spencer: We have regular conversations across the supply chain. The hon. Gentleman is right to identify that the supply chain needs fairness to be built into it. There needs to be a sharing of risk, responsibility and reward. We have regular conversations with retailers, processors and primary producers to try to encourage fairness across the supply chain.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Welcome support for farmers in Dorset and across the country would be for the Department and Government as a whole to learn the lessons on trade deals, as pointed out by the Secretary of State's predecessor but one, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). Can the Secretary of State set out the discussions that she has with Ministers about trade deals, to ensure that UK farmers' interests, food production and security are at the heart of the discussions?

Dr Coffey: I assure my hon. Friend that I see my role as Secretary of State as ensuring that we have productive trade agreements, which include exports as well as potential imports. It is important, and it has been a key part of our negotiations, that we not only protect our sanitary and phytosanitary and animal welfare standards but ensure that any impact on the domestic market is sufficient that British farmers continue to grow, and rear, their brilliant British food and livestock.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I know the Government and the Minister, in particular, take a deep interest in fisheries issues, specifically about spurdog fishing; I asked the Minister a question about that some time ago. Will the Minister confirm that the total allowable catch for spurdog will be announced? That will create a significant boost for all local fisheries, especially those in Northern Ireland.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman demonstrates again how informed he is on this matter. From Saturday, it will be possible to catch spurdog. The statutory instrument has now been laid. That species is now open to fishermen across devolved Administrations and the whole of the United Kingdom to go and catch from Saturday. We will be allocating quota in the very near future.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Illegal Immigration Bill: ECHR Compatibility

1. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the compatibility of the Illegal Migration Bill with the UK's obligations under the European convention on human rights. [904392]

2. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the compatibility of the Illegal Migration Bill with the Council of Europe convention on action against trafficking in human beings. [904393]

5. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the compatibility of the Illegal Migration Bill with the convention relating to the status of refugees. [904398]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 2 and 5 together. By convention, where the law officers have been asked to provide advice, the contents of any such advice is not disclosed outside Government. That protects our ability as legal advisers to give the Government full and frank legal advice.

Mr Carmichael: I somehow suspected that the answer would be something like that. The Attorney General knows that I am one of her admirers, and long have been so, right back to the days of her maiden speech, when I remind the House she said:

> "The European convention on human rights is a masterful document, and we must remain a signatory to it...In this country, the courts are unable to quash an Act of Parliament. It seems we need to re-state that, while our courts should have regard to the decisions of the ECHR, these are on the same footing, and Parliament is sovereign."—[*Official Report*, 25 June 2015; Vol. 597, c. 1113.]

Will she confirm that that thinking still informs her assessment of these questions? If she can, I think the rest of us can join up the dots for ourselves.

The Attorney General: Well, Madam Deputy Speaker, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the admiration is entirely mutual. I also assure him that I heard very recently the Prime Minister, from this Dispatch Box, assure the House that it is the Government's policy to remain a signatory to the ECHR.

Stuart C. McDonald: Articles 12 and 13 of the trafficking convention require states to support a trafficking victim's physical, psychological and social recovery, including through a rest and recovery period, but clauses 22 and onwards of her Government's awful Illegal Migration Bill expressly deny trafficking and slavery victims access to such support. I too have a lot of respect for the Attorney General, but she will lose support and respect if she continues to allow that Bill to proceed in blatant breach of the trafficking convention.

The Attorney General: As I have said, all lawyers have a duty of confidentiality to their clients and I am simply not permitted to tell the hon. Gentleman, or indeed anybody else, what legal advice has been shared between our office and that of the Government. The use of the Human Rights Act 1998 section 19(1)(b) statement does not mean that the Bill breaches the ECHR. It just means that the Home Secretary cannot state that the Bill is more likely than not compatible with convention rights. If legal challenges are made, we will take all steps to defend our position in court.

Kirsten Oswald: Can the Attorney General clarify what assessment she has made of the legality of the amendments to the Illegal Migration Bill that are aimed at sidestepping the convention relating to the status of refugees, as well as ignoring the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights? If those amendments were to be accepted by the UK Government, what does she think it would mean? Does she think it could put the UK's place on the Council of Europe at risk?

The Attorney General: As I have said, I am not able to share my assessment, but perhaps it might be useful for the House to know when a section 19(1)(b) statement has previously been used. It was used in relation to the Communications Act 2003 by Tessa Jowell, who used words very similar to mine just now:

> "That does not mean that we believe the Bill to be incompatible…and we would mount a robust defence if it were legally challenged."—[*Official Report*, 8 December 2002; Vol. 395, c. 789.]

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): And it wasn't.

The Attorney General: It was challenged. It was challenged all the way up to the ECHR, and I understand that in the end the Government won by nine votes to eight.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Justice.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I have no doubt, and nor has anyone in this House, about the Attorney General's commitment or that of Conservative Members to the European convention on human rights. Beyond the fact that the section 19(1)(b) statement, while unusual, is not unique, does she agree that it is also important to remember that our whole case law system depends on existing legal precedent being tested from time to time in the light of changing and emerging factual circumstances to which case law or existing statute can be applied? The testing of the legal position is not any kind of illegality or impropriety at all.

The Attorney General: I agree wholeheartedly. I feel it is perfectly proper for lawyers—Government lawyers, in this case—to test a novel idea before the courts. In fact, one reason I very much enjoyed my career in the Government Legal Service is that Government lawyers frequently do so. It is one of the main reasons why people ought to apply to join.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Thank goodness I am not a lawyer! We have an excellent Minister, who has spent the whole of this question not answering it. Three questions on the Order Paper, about three completely different conventions, have been grouped together; I have no idea why. It seems to me that what we want is the Minister to answer the question.

May I try a question on the Council of Europe convention on action against trafficking in human beings? It is clear that people who come across in boats are smuggled. That is not part of the convention, but people who are already here who are forced into prostitution or slave labour should be protected by that convention. Will the Attorney General tell us—please answer!—whether the Illegal Migration Bill will be amended so that those people are still protected? A yes or no will do.

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is a staunch defender of the procedures and the propriety of our activities in this House. I know that he will agree that it is important that the Law Officers convention is upheld. As I have said, I cannot share my advice with this House; I would very much like to do so, but I am unable to. For the Government's position, I refer the House to the explanatory notes that accompany the Illegal Migration Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last month, the Attorney General told the Justice Committee:

"It is particularly important that they"—

Government lawyers—

"work to keep the Government acting properly and within the rule of law".

The House of Lords Constitution Committee found in January that the Government had

"twice knowingly introduced legislation in Parliament which would…undermine the rule of law: the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill and the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill."

This Illegal Migration Bill, even before the Attorney General's own Back Benchers are finished with it, is a further example of that. When will her

"first duty…as an officer of the court"—

those are her words—trump her loyalty to a lawbreaking Government?

The Attorney General: My first duty is to the court and to the rule of law. I have absolutely no hesitation about restating that as often as the hon. Gentleman wishes me to; it is something that I believe very deeply, and I know that the Solicitor General agrees. Our advice on the Illegal Migration Bill is not something that we are able to share with the House. The use of the section 19(1)(b) statement is, as I have explained, unusual, but not unprecedented and certainly not improper.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is no secret that the Attorney General has reservations about the Illegal Migration Bill, and it is also no secret that those on the far right of her party are intent on rebelling to push the Bill further into breaking international law. Will she do the honourable thing today, and confirm that if the Prime Minister concedes on this, she will make a stand and declare the Bill unlawful?

The Attorney General: I am very pleased that the Illegal Migration Bill passed its Committee stage in the House without amendment.

Violence against Women and Girls: Prosecutions

3. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the proportion of cases relating to violence against women and girls that are prosecuted. [904396]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): Tackling violence against women and girls remains a key priority for the Government. We are doing everything possible to make our streets and homes safer for them, not least through our joint national action plan, which has seen a significant increase in the volume of charges for adult rape since January 2021.

Kerry McCarthy: Government statistics published this morning show that 29% of Crown court cases have been open for more than a year, and Rape Crisis reports that, according to the response to a freedom of information request, there is a record backlog of sexual assault and rape cases, with trials frequently postponed. What impact does the Solicitor General think that that backlog—the situation in the courts—is having on the ability of the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute rape cases?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising an important issue. It is correct to say that the time between charge and completion is being reduced, but she is right: it is still too long. One factor that will encourage victims to stay within the criminal justice process, which is what we all want to see, is the provision of support by independent sexual violence advisers, and guidance is being put on a statutory footing in that regard.

The hon. Lady may be interested to know that I spoke to her local chief Crown prosecutor in person yesterday, in a neighbouring Bristol constituency, and she is doing an excellent job. Last year, the number of suspects charged for adult rape in the CPS south-west area more than doubled.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I am sure that the whole House wants to see much higher prosecution rates for people who commit the appalling crime of raping women and girls. What impact does the Solicitor General think that the brilliant Operation Soteria will have on the current prosecution rates?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to mention Operation Soteria. There is, in fact, a link with the question from the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), because Operation Soteria was founded in her area. It is making a significant difference, and the volume of adult rape suspects charged has more than doubled in the last year.

Fraud and Economic Crime: Prosecutions

4. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure effective prosecution of perpetrators of fraud and economic crime. [904397]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): We are determined to strengthen our response to all forms of economic crime, including fraud, and the Government will soon publish a new fraud strategy to address this threat. Both the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office play an important role in bringing fraudsters to justice.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): As the Solicitor General will know, each September the Cambridge International Symposium on Economic Crime, organised by Professor Barry Rider, meets at Jesus College Cambridge, and the issue of establishing a dedicated anti-fraud or economic crime agency is frequently raised. What consideration has been given to that proposal, and what is the Solicitor General doing to promote education about fraud, and prevention and discouragement of it, through effective early compliance?

The Solicitor General: I am indeed aware of that symposium, because I have been invited to speak at it this year, and I very much hope to see the hon. Gentleman there so that we can discuss this subject even further. As he will know, the National Economic Crime Centre, which was launched in 2018, leads the UK's operational response to economic crime. As for his wider question, he will be aware of the Government's fraud strategy, which will be released soon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Attorney General.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Every day that passes, more lives are destroyed by fraud. We urgently need a Government who understand the scale of that crisis and have a plan to tackle it. Five months ago, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and told us that

"the Government will shortly publish our fraud strategy…to block more scams and better protect the public."—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2022; Vol. 721, c. 859.]

The Solicitor General has told us again today that the strategy will come shortly. Do the Government have a different concept of time? What do they mean by "shortly", and how much longer are we going to need to wait—or is this just another example of the Government making big promises on crucial issues and delivering absolutely nothing?

The Solicitor General: The shadow Attorney General is not right about that. The fraud strategy will be published. In terms of delivery, she will be pleased to hear that last year the CPS prosecuted over 6,000 defendants where fraud and forgery was the principal offence, and the conviction rate was over 80%. This is a Government that have delivered and will continue to deliver in this area.

People Traffickers: Prosecutions

6. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What steps she is taking to increase prosecution rates for (a) small boat gangs and (b) other people traffickers. [904399]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): Last week I met the Minister for Immigration to discuss how we can increase the prosecution rate further for those who engage in this dangerous offending. I am pleased to report that there has been a significant increase in all immigration prosecutions since the end of June last year, with the CPS bringing 260 prosecutions and so far securing 164 convictions.

Wendy Chamberlain: Increasing prosecution rates is an important way of tackling people trafficking, but another is ensuring safe and legal routes for people seeking asylum. The all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls, which I co-chair, has written to the Government looking for support for those very vulnerable groups. Does the Attorney General accept that her assessment for the Government of the Illegal Migration Bill might be better if safe and legal routes were progressed at the same time?

The Attorney General: I thank the hon. Lady for her work on that important APPG; she will have heard my answer to the previous question. The Government need to use every tool available to us to stop these dangerous crossings. One of those tools is prosecution, which is going well. Another tool is working closely with the French Government, and it is important to note that the French have prevented 31,000 crossings this year, which is nearly 50% up on this time last year.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): The Government are working flat out to stop people smugglers from continuing their evil trade and to ensure that they are brought to justice. What assistance is the Crown Prosecution Service providing to investigators on small boat pilots and other people traffickers?

The Attorney General: The Crown Prosecution Service is working hard on these prosecutions and will not hesitate where people are suspected of immigration

offences whenever the legal test is met. It is focusing on the pilots of small boats and also on disrupting the supply chains of people traffickers and organised crime gangs.

Sentences of Imprisonment for Public Protection

7. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Justice on the effectiveness of ongoing sentences of imprisonment for public protection. [904400]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): The Attorney General and I meet the Secretary of State for Justice regularly and discuss numerous issues. Where they touch on legal issues and advice, the hon. Lady will know, and will have heard the Attorney General clearly set out, that the Law Officers' convention applies.

Jessica Morden: Imprisonment for public protection sentences were abolished in 2012, but that did not apply retrospectively. A constituent of mine whose son is serving an IPP sentence dating from before then has told me how this causes continued uncertainty and disruption for the whole family, and concern about their son's mental health deteriorating. Can the Minister commit to working to reach a consensus on how best to address these long-standing IPP cases?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady raises a very serious point, and I am grateful to her. IPP sentences were first introduced in 2003, and she is right that they were abolished in 2012, but not retrospectively, nor properly could they have been. Further reforms were introduced last year, but it is right that, by definition, those in prison on IPP sentences have not been assessed as safe to release. However, I will certainly put her in touch with the Prisons Minister to discuss the matter further.

Crown Prosecution Service: Legal Trainees

8. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to increase its number of legal trainees. [904401]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): The CPS runs an award-winning and highly competitive legal training scheme, which has seen hundreds of trainees undertake a training contract and/or pupillage across England and Wales with the CPS since 2012.

Stephen Metcalfe: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his answer. Building on that, can he tell the House what steps he is taking to encourage people from a more diverse background to consider the law as a career?

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful indeed to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. The CPS has extended its postgraduate qualification requirements to include new solicitors qualification examinations, which opens up the career to a more diverse audience. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be pleased to know that for the last three years the CPS was ranked No. 1 in the Universum rankings as a highly attractive employer to law students. I commend to my hon. Friend, and indeed to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a visit to your local chief Crown prosecutors to find out more and to encourage law students to sign up to the CPS. I addressed the CPS leaders conference in Bristol yesterday, and they are very keen to meet us all.

Antisocial Behaviour: Prosecutions

9. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure effective prosecution of antisocial behaviour. [904403]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): We know the serious impact that persistent antisocial behaviour can have on both individuals and the wider community. Those who commit antisocial behaviour will face swift and visible justice, increased fines and enhanced drug testing as part of the Government's new action plan.

Liz Twist: As the Attorney General says, antisocial behaviour has a terrible impact on communities such as Winlaton in my constituency, so I am glad that the Government have finally seen the light and increased sentences. Does she regret that the Government allowed the use of community sentences to fall by 62% between 2010 and 2021, and that the sentences became so much weaker?

The Attorney General: I know there has been a particular problem with antisocial behaviour in the hon. Lady's constituency. As a result, Northumbria police will receive trailblazer funding for both immediate justice and hotspot policing. I think it is important that the courts are able to use the wide range of sentences available to them.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Ynys Môn has received more than £695,000 from the safer streets fund, and I am delighted that some of the money is being used by Môn Communities Forward for first aid courses and by North Wales police for free boxing sessions for women and girls at the canolfan in Holyhead, which the Attorney General is welcome to attend. Can she confirm to my Ynys Môn constituents that, in addition to making Anglesey's streets safer, this Government are committed to cracking down on antisocial behaviour?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituency. The plan unveiled this week will have a real and visible impact on antisocial behaviour around the country. It will be interesting to see the learning we get from the areas that have been targeted because there are particular problems. I think the impact will be swift.

Junior Doctors' Strikes

10.37 am

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the impact of the junior doctors' strikes and what steps he is taking to prevent further strike action.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for his question. I know that colleagues and constituents will be concerned about the planned 96-hour walkout organised by unions representing junior doctors.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the impact, and we know that during the previous walkout by junior doctors earlier this month, 181,000 appointments had to be rescheduled. The disruption and risk will be far greater with this four-day walkout, not only because it lasts longer but because it coincides with extended public holidays and Ramadan, with knock-on effects on services before and after the strike action itself, and because a significant proportion of junior doctors will already be on planned absence due to the holiday period.

NHS England has stated that it will prioritise a number of areas, including emergency treatment, critical care, maternity care, neonatal care and trauma, but—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman asked the urgent question, so he might want to hear the answer. NHS England has been clear that it cannot fully mitigate the risk of patient harm at this time, which is concerning and disappointing. Patients should not have to face such disruption again, and I have invited the British Medical Association and the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association to enter formal talks on pay, with the condition that they cancel strike action.

The BMA's junior doctors committee's refusal to engage in conversations unless we commit to delivering a 35% pay increase is unacceptable at a time of considerable economic pressure and suggests a leadership that is adopting a militant position, rather than working constructively with the Government in the interests of patients. None the less, we remain determined to find a settlement that not only prevents further strike action but, equally, recognises the important work of junior doctors within the NHS, just as we have done with the "Agenda for Change" trade unions in their dispute. We will continue to work in good faith, in the interest of everyone who uses the NHS.

Wes Streeting: More than 300,000 operations and appointments have been cancelled due to industrial action in the NHS since December. The strikes planned for next month will be longer than any previous ones, with no derogations planned and they will be coming off the back of the bank holiday weekend. Patients are worried sick and consultants have written to me to say they are terrified for patients' safety—they fear that patients will die as a result. So when is the Health Secretary going to get junior doctors back in for talks, take them seriously and stop these catastrophic strikes from wreaking havoc on patient care?

First, the Government failed to learn the lessons of the nurses' strikes and refused to speak to junior doctors until the last minute. Then, instead of treating junior doctors with respect and sitting down for proper negotiations, Ministers took to Twitter for a mud-slinging match. The British Medical Association accused the Secretary of State of misrepresenting the truth when he tweeted that its pay demand was a "pre-condition". The BMA has since said that it is a "starting point" for negotiations. Will he today clarify which side is correct and who was spreading fake news?

Since the beginning of these disputes, the Government have acted like a bystander when patients needed action. Never was that clearer than when the Prime Minister said that he did not want to "get in the middle" of them. We have a Prime Minister whose idea of leadership looks more like cowardice. He talks about delivery, but the NHS is still waiting. These strikes come at a time when the Government are failing to cut the NHS backlog. But it is not only the backlog that they have built up—a plethora of plans were trailed in the press in recent weeks but on the final sitting day before recess none has emerged. There is no sign of the NHS workforce plan, when the NHS is short of more than 150,000 staff. There is no sign of the general practice plan, when patients are finding it impossible to see their GP. There is no sign either of the review of integrated care services or the social care update, which reports suggest contains a stealth cut of £250 million to the social care workforce. So can the Secretary of State say whether the Government are planning to get the bad news out over recess and avoid scrutiny in this House, or is it less sinister and they just do not know what they are doing?

Steve Barclay: The urgent question was on the junior doctors—*[Interruption.]* I am sure I will quote—*[Interruption.]* There is a rare point of agreement between us. The hon. Gentleman is chuntering, but let me go through the list of things that he did raise pertaining to the junior doctors' dispute. He said that the Government should get the junior doctors committee in for talks; we have done so—his third question made reference to the fact that we have. We have had the junior doctors in for discussions—*[Interruptions.]* I will run through the questions.

The hon. Gentleman questions whether there are preconditions attached to those discussions. I have checked the minutes of the meeting and there was a list of conditions —a pay restoration of 35%, and a range of other factors that were put on the table— that were preconditions that the Government had to commit to. The point is that he has said in the media that he does not support those preconditions. He says that 35% is unaffordable, so what is his position? One minute he says that he supports the junior doctors and that they should not go on strike, yet the next minute he says that he does not actually support the precondition that the junior doctors have said is the requirement for them to enter into discussion.

The reality is that the Government have taken a constructive and meaningful approach to trade union negotiations. That is why we have reached agreement with the "Agenda for Change" trade unions. It is why the Royal College of Nursing, Unison, the GMB and the Royal College of Midwives are all recommending the agreement that has been reached, covering more than 1 million staff across the NHS, to their members. The junior doctors have set a precondition on those talks which the hon. Gentleman does not agree—*[Interruption.]* That is a precondition. He does not seem to understand the terms the junior doctors—*[Interruption.]* He asked

the question, he is getting the answer and the fact that it points to the contradiction in his own position is one that he seems to be having trouble with. Conservative Members are used to contradictions from those on the Opposition Front Bench. He supports the use of the independent sector, whereas his deputy does not. He wants to nationalise the GP estate, but his shadow Chancellor does not. The Opposition are full of contradictions. The reality is that there is a position in terms of the—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) chunters again. There is a position in terms of precondition. The shadow Secretary of State asked me to confirm at the Dispatch Box whether it was a precondition of the junior doctors. Ahead of the urgent question, I checked the minutes—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We cannot have this constant chuntering.

Steve Barclay: The Opposition do not seem to like their question being answered. The shadow Secretary of State asked me to confirm the position, for the avoidance of doubt, at the Dispatch Box. That is exactly what I am doing. I have checked the minutes. I have spoken this morning with officials to confirm, before I made the statement to the House, that it was a precondition of the talks. We were told, in terms of the pay erosion of 26.1%, that that needed to be restored at 35%, alongside other things. The reality is that he does not support that. He is facing both ways, wanting to support the junior doctors, but not actually willing to support the pay that they are demanding.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What does it do for a respected profession that, when one visits a hospital, one is confronted by a rabble chanting like a schump of rudies, particularly when they have not co-operated with hospital authorities to minimise the impact of their absence?

Steve Barclay: I would draw an important distinction between a militant group that appears to have taken over the junior doctors committee and the vast majority of junior doctors who do a hugely important job within the NHS. We recognise in Government that they have faced considerable pressures from the pandemic, and we stand ready to work constructively with them. There are, on the other hand, some within the BMA junior doctors committee who appear to have a more political agenda. Indeed, I refer hon. Members to the statements of members of that committee, who have said that they want to move the BMA to more traditional trade union activity and to pursue a more overt political agenda.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This is an urgent question, but I do not get a sense of urgency from the Secretary of State that he wants to resolve the dispute. I am afraid that standing at the Dispatch Box and traducing the junior doctors for their approach will not help to resolve this matter. I urge him to drop any preconditions on any future meetings, because the only way that this can be resolved is through negotiation. Will he do that now?

Steve Barclay: First, there is absolutely no traducing going on. In my last answer, I praised the junior doctors and recognised the fact that they have faced huge pressure from the pandemic, which is why we stand ready to work with them. Some on the BMA junior doctors committee have a different agenda, but we stand ready to work very constructively with that committee. The hon. Gentleman suggested that I drop the precondition. It is not I who set the precondition; it is the junior doctors committee that did so. I remind the House that it includes restoration to 2008 levels of all elements of pay, not just basic pay; parking fees and exam fees; and "radical" reform of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration. It is the junior doctors committee that set those preconditions, not the Government.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the way in which he and his team have worked to find solutions with other trade unions, particularly the nurses. None the less, the 96-hour walkout is a significant period of disruption. Can he confirm that he is doing everything he can to ensure that those needing urgent healthcare in Warrington will be able to access it despite the industrial action by the BMA?

Steve Barclay: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Yes, the Department is working very closely with colleagues in NHS England and across the NHS to mitigate as best we can the impact of the junior doctors' strike. He is right that we had meaningful and constructive talks with the staff council representing "Agenda for Change" staff. I am very pleased that, as a result of the constructive engagement we had, the NHS staff council was able to recommend that pay award to its members. He is right that that points to the constructive approach that we have taken. We stand ready to have that constructive engagement with junior doctors, recognising the real pressures that the profession has been under. We will mitigate as best we can, but, given the timing over the Easter period, obviously, there is a risk in terms of patient harm. We will do all we can to mitigate that.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The latest figures from January 2023 showed 7.21 million people waiting for NHS treatment. What impact does the Secretary of State think this strike will have on the extremely hard work that has been done across the NHS to reduce those waiting lists, and what plans does he have to address the impact that the strike will have on waiting lists, if he does not plan to take any action to avoid it?

Steve Barclay: I think we can see what sort of impact it will have from the previous strike, which was over three days and impacted 181,049 appointments. We can see there will be a significant impact. On mitigations, as part of our electives recovery plan, we are doing a range of things, including expanding community diagnostic hubs and the fast-tracking of surgical hubs. The NHS is responding brilliantly with things such as super Saturdays, where teams process higher volumes of treatments, particularly in certain areas. We have the Getting It Right First Time programme, led by Sir Jim Mackey and Professor Tim Briggs, which is looking at how we embed best practice. Having hit the first interim milestone of our recovery plan in the summer, the two-year wait, we are now focused on the 78-week wait target and working our way through that.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): The British Medical Association's pay demands are more than four times the size of the private sector average pay increase.

[Selaine Saxby]

Does my right hon. Friend agree that inflation is the enemy, making everyone poorer, and that public sector pay rises of over 25% will only drive inflation even higher?

Steve Barclay: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to do both: we need to get inflation down, recognising that has an impact across the whole workforce, including for those working within the NHS itself, and we need to recognise the real pressure that junior doctors and others within the NHS have faced. That is why we stand ready to have meaningful and constructive talks with junior doctors, in exactly the same way as we have had with midwives, nurses and others within "Agenda for Change". We must balance the wider issue of inflation and what is affordable to the economy against recognising the real pressures the NHS has faced and responding to that, including for junior doctors.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State cannot blame the Opposition for his mess. Nearly every day I retweet ads from the local NHS trust, which is trying desperately to recruit doctors and other staff. Does he accept that pay is a key factor in the large number of vacancies within the NHS, and will he do something to sort that out?

Steve Barclay: I accept that pay is an important factor. It is not the only factor—the estate and technology are also important. There is a range of issues. That is exactly the conversation I had with the trade unions representing "Agenda for Change". We discussed with them both changes to pay and the non-pay measures. There are a range of factors, and we stand ready to have those discussions with junior doctors. However, they have chosen to take a more political, militant stance, in contrast with the approach that other trade unions have pursued.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I also feel that the Secretary of State's attitude and language from the Dispatch Box this morning are not very helpful in negotiating with such a key group of people. The BMA accused the Secretary of State of misrepresenting the truth when he tweeted that its pay demand was a precondition. Does he now accept that the BMA has said its 35% demand is a starting point? Will he therefore sit down and negotiate an affordable settlement, without delay, and can he clarify which side is correct?

Steve Barclay: I have already answered that question twice, but I am very happy to repeat at the Dispatch Box the fact that I checked with my officials in the Department this morning—with people who were in the room—and have also checked the minutes. That was the position that the junior doctors set out in terms of a precondition. Indeed, they have repeatedly stated in the media that they expect a 35% pay restoration—and not simply that, but additional things such as exam fees, parking fees, reform of the DDRB and so forth. That is the position the junior doctors have set out. I repeat that we want to work constructively with junior doctors. We recognise that the profession has faced huge pressure through the pandemic and we stand ready to work constructively with them in the same way that we have with the GMB, the RCN, Unison and many other trade unions.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Junior doctors are the backbone of the NHS. I would never describe those whom I have met as "militant"; they are hard-working and of all ages. Somehow, this is the second strike that junior doctors have staged in the last 13 years—there was none in the previous 13 years, under a Labour Government. Will the Secretary of State confirm: has he not set out his own precondition, and that is that he will not meet them until they call off the strikes?

Steve Barclay: There are two different things there—one on which the hon. Gentleman is correct and one on which he is not. He is correct that we have said that a precondition for meaningful and constructive talks is that the trade union suspends strikes. That is a precondition that the other trade unions were more than willing to accept, and it is applied in other sectors such as education. We have been clear on that.

The hon. Gentleman is not correct on my point about militancy, which referred to the junior doctors committee specifically. We stand ready and recognise the real pressure that many within the junior doctors community have faced. The NHS has been under significant pressure coming out of the pandemic. We recognise that there are issues on which we want to work and have constructive engagement with them. It is just regrettable that some in the junior doctors committee of the BMA want, as they have said in media interviews, to take a more overt political agenda, rather than work with us to focus on the real issues that many junior doctors are concerned about.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I note that the Secretary of State is trying extremely hard to try to find settlements. The settlement with the Royal College of Nursing and the nurses is an example of just that, although it took a bit of time—I would have liked to see it happen sooner. Will the Secretary of State outline what support is available for junior doctors who need greater support from registrars and consultants to restore confidence—that is the whole point of the F1 and F2 process—so that they are not left to drown under the pressure of handling entire wards on the worst shift patterns possible, wondering, when they go home, whether the decisions that they have made are the wrong ones? Will the Secretary of State ensure that financial and wage negotiations will be constructive, as he did when it came to the RCN and the nurses?

Steve Barclay: I am very happy to give the hon. Gentleman reassurance about our desire to have that constructive engagement, exactly as we had with colleagues on the NHS staff council. There are a number of issues on which we are keen to work with junior doctors: rostering; which he mentioned; holidays, which are sometimes cancelled at short notice—a range of issues have been raised with me. When I go on visits to hospitals, as I do frequently, staff raise a range of issues, and I am very keen to work through them with junior doctors. I think that people can see from the approach that we took not just with "Agenda for Change", but with the pension changes that were announced in the Budget, that the Government are working constructively with the NHS to address those issues. We stand ready to have exactly that meaningful and constructive engagement with junior doctors.

Business of the House

10.58 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): The business for the week commencing 17 April will include:

MONDAY 17 APRIL—Second Reading of the Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill.

TUESDAY 18 APRIL—Consideration in Committee of the Finance (No. 2) Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 19 APRIL—Consideration in Committee of the Finance (No. 2) Bill (day 2).

THURSDAY 20 APRIL—General debate on international trade and geopolitics, followed by general debate on human rights protections for Palestinians. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 21 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 24 April includes:

MONDAY 24 APRIL—Second Reading of the Non-Domestic Rating Bill.

TUESDAY 25 APRIL—Remaining stages of the Illegal Migration Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 APRIL—Opposition day (14th allotted day). Debate in the name of the official Opposition, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 27 APRIL—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 28 APRIL—The House will not be sitting.

Jessica Morden: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. It is good to be stepping in for the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), this week. I want to start by wishing everybody across the House a very happy Easter, or Pasg hapus in Welsh, including all our staff who work so hard not just for us but for the people we represent and all those in the House service who help us and allow us to get on with our jobs every day.

I congratulate the Government on making it through a full term with the same Prime Minister. He is just about still standing, seemingly with a full set of Ministers too—what an achievement for the Government! It is a true triumph for the Tories, given their recent track record.

Easter is the perfect time for a spring clean. The Government clearly agree, because today they have dusted off 17 written ministerial statements, but are the Government planning to allow MPs to ask Ministers questions in the House on any of them? I note the Prime Minister's statement on the machinery of government. Will the Leader of the House tell us whether that includes plans to publish an updated list of ministerial responsibilities? It is essential that MPs' staff and our constituents have a clear understanding of who is responsible for what and how best to contact them.

I wonder whether the Department of Health and Social Care is also planning a clear-out this recess. Perhaps it could go in search of the NHS workforce plan. After repeatedly calling for it from the Back Benches, the Chancellor finally promised that he would deliver it in the autumn statement. Then he said at the Budget that it would be published "shortly". Where is it? Do they actually have a plan at all? Can the Leader of the House tell us whether Ministers plan to publish their missing plan in recess, when Parliament is not sitting? Perhaps they think that that way, they will not be held to account.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) highlighted in a point of order this week, the UK Statistics Authority has debunked the claim made by the Minister for Immigration that the asylum backlog when Labour left office was in the hundreds of thousands. It was in fact 18,954. Under the Tories, it is 166,261—eight times higher than in 2010. The shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), has called out claims that the Government are recruiting extra police officers. In recent years they have hollowed out neighbourhood policing, as we have all seen. In the spirit of Easter and new beginnings, could the Leader of the House get the appropriate Ministers to correct the record? Will they wipe the slate clean and commit to sticking to accurate figures in future?

The Leader of the House has announced the remaining stages of her Illegal Migration Bill. Perhaps she could learn some lessons from the year 5s at Lliswerry Primary School in my constituency who I met last week, who have been studying the Bill and shared their wise insights on it with me. Of course, we must stop these dangerous boat crossings that are putting lives at risk, but the people of Newport East know that this is not the way to do it. They support Labour's plan to crack down on criminal gangs instead.

Why is the Leader of the House happy with such a poorly worded Bill? It has a number of inconsistencies, meaning that it will not even work as the Government say it will. It is not just morally wrong; it is impractical too. Can she explain what the Government will do with someone who, after appeal, cannot legally be deported but would still be barred from claiming asylum? They would be in legal limbo, would they not?

Finally, the shadow Leader of the House has tried three times in a row to get the Leader of the House to tell us when the Government's impact assessment on the Illegal Migration Bill will be published. The Government failed to provide one on Second Reading or in Committee. Will we get it before the remaining stages? What are they hiding? What is the cost of the Bill, and what is the Government's current detention capacity? The Leader of the House is clearly unwilling to tell the shadow Leader of the House when the impact assessment will be published, so today, can I have a go too?

Penny Mordaunt: I start by joining the hon. Lady in wishing everyone in this House and all of our staff a very happy Easter recess. I will pass on her kind words to the Prime Minister—I thank her for mentioning that—and I also place on record my congratulations and thanks to not just our new Clerk of the House, who will be taking over later this year, but all the excellent candidates who put themselves forward for that post.

Of course, there are plenty of opportunities for questions: standard Department Question Times, the ability to ask for urgent questions, and of course Ministers make statements to this House on a regular basis. We always

[Penny Mordaunt]

publish the list of ministerial responsibilities. It is an incredibly important tool to enable Members of this House to address any concerns they have to the appropriate Minister, and I will certainly make sure that that is done in a timely way.

Turning to the hon. Lady's questions about the impact assessment on the Illegal Migration Bill, I am the Government's representative in Parliament, but I am also Parliament's representative in Government. Members have made very reasonable requests about impact assessments and having sight of them. I take those responsibilities very seriously, and I have made representations to the Home Office, both to the Home Secretary and through my officials speaking to the permanent secretary. It is very important that we send this Bill to the Lords in a good state, and I have heard what Members of this House have said about the level of scrutiny of the Bill.

We are producing this legislation at pace: it is a priority for the Prime Minister that we get the statute book to give us some powers to tackle this very serious problem. The hon. Lady knows the reason why we are facing increased illegal migration: it is a global phenomenon. That trend will continue, which is why it is really important that we have these new powers to deal with it, and to ensure that the international rules are able to deal with these new challenges. I urge the Opposition to support us in those efforts to modernise the rules and processes, so that we can direct resource to the people who really need that support.

I am very pleased to welcome the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) to her place today, although we miss the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). We understand that she is launching Labour's local government campaign today. I was disappointed, but not surprised, to see the central plank of that campaign being the brilliant idea of saving taxpayers money off their council tax bills by subsidising them with taxpayers' money. That perfectly illustrates Labour's approach: since 2010, council tax has risen by 36%. Under Labour in the same time period, it rose by 110%, and what was true then is true now: Labour's councils deliver poorer services for more of your money. If your council is Labour, on average, you will be paying £80 more for those services. If your police and crime commissioner is Labour, your chances of being burgled double, and you are 44% more likely to be a victim of knife crime.

Labour-run Slough is increasing council tax by 10%, having bankrupted the local authority. Sandwell is raising its council tax by a mere 5%, but is hiking additional waste collection services, and Westminster has decided that in a time of public sector pay restraint, its councillors ought to have a 45% pay increase—10 times what its hard-working staff will get. In contrast, Conservative councils keep tax low while maintaining and increasing services, and some are even reducing council tax bills for vulnerable families: North Lincolnshire is doing so for 7,000 households. That is public service to be proud of.

Further business will be announced in the usual way.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): It is high time that we had a debate about parental choice in education. Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council is holding a consultation on withdrawing the funding for parents who choose to send their kids to school outside the borough, particularly those whose children attend Walton-le-Dale, Turton or Canon Slade schools. This is deeply distressing for those parents who are having to consider pulling their kids out of school and making alternative plans. Does the Leader of the House agree with me, Councillor Rick Moore, Councillor Lilian Salton and Councillor Jean Rigby that, with the spending power of its budget having gone up by 33% in the past five years, Blackburn council should back local parents who want to make a choice to send their children to faith schools outside the borough?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend raises a depressing situation. I think sometimes people look at numbers on a spreadsheet and they forget about the impact that cuts to such services have on families. It will affect education and where people go to school, and people really rely on those services. That is why we have committed £3 billion for bus transformation. Why that local authority would target these basic services, particularly against the backdrop of its budget increasing, is beyond me. I urge it to reconsider, and I congratulate him and his council colleagues on what they are doing to try to retain the service.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): May I start by congratulating our new SNP leader and Scotland's First Minister, Humza Yousaf? Very movingly, he paid tribute in his victory speech to his grandparents, who emigrated from Punjab 60 years ago. It is such a strong message that neither the colour of someone's skin nor their faith should be a barrier to reaching the highest office.

Was it not therefore ironic and deeply sad that in the same week, this place was debating the so-called Illegal Migration Bill? We were told that people seeking refuge and asylum were "breaking into Britain", as if they were thieves. That line no doubt played well with Conservative party focus groups, and it was regurgitated by the Government's Minister for Immigration. No doubt as the Government rev up their culture wars, we will hear it again.

The Leader of the House describes herself as Parliament's representative in Government, but this House was not given the opportunity for line-by-line scrutiny of this rushed Bill, as would have occurred in a Committee Room upstairs. It is feast or famine with this lot. It is either weeks of filler debates or frantically pushing through controversial Bills such as this without time for proper scrutiny or debate. Is it not part of the Leader of the House's job to organise the business of this House? As Parliament's representative in Government, what is her excuse for this latest boorach?

Shamefully, we still have no real detail on what measures are being put in place to safeguard children and young people, despite so many of them still being missing from existing hotel arrangements. Can we have a debate examining the protections for these minors before the Bill returns to the House?

Lastly, we expect a veritable avalanche of written statements on green issues today, most of which will be, fittingly enough, recycled announcements. It is clear that after decades of Westminster Governments squandering Scotland's immense energy resources, both Labour and

the Tories are once again greedily eyeing up our potential, this time as a clean energy superpower, and even lecturing the Scottish Government for their supposed failure on renewables while visiting a wind farm operated by that very same Government.

We are being told that the UK's energy revolution is being made in Scotland, powering up Britain with Scotland's clean, green energy—funny, I thought Scotland was a basket case that was too poor to survive without the UK. Plus ça change. When will there be a debate finally in this place on Scotland's green energy revolution, so that we can see how the track record and future plans of the different parties truly measure up?

Penny Mordaunt: I will start with the hon. Lady's last point. I am sorry she does not welcome the announcements today on energy security. Our track record over the past decade on increasing renewables, strengthening the diversity of our energy sources and decreasing our reliance on other nations is very important, and I want to see that commitment matched by the Scottish Government. They have still not made the investments they said they would in this area, and I encourage them to do so. I cannot keep up with the changes to the SNP's energy policy, but I think roughly it is against all forms of energy, except perhaps hot air. It is not Scotland that is the basket case; it is the SNP.

The second point the hon. Lady raises is one I personally take seriously, which is in regard to illegal migration. Like many Members from all parts of the House, I am hosting a Ukrainian refugee. Prior to that, I offered my home for Afghan refugees, and prior to getting into this place, I was an aid worker. I take these matters very seriously. That is why this Bill is needed, because unless safe nations such as the UK can have the powers they need to run effective systems—systems that do not just rely on someone's ability to get into a country illegally in order to get a chance of help—we will not be able to continue the generous history we have in this nation of being somewhere that people can gain sanctuary. I urge her, in all seriousness, to reflect on that and to engage with the Illegal Migration Bill as it makes its passage through this House.

Finally, I want to welcome the First Minister. It is, as the hon. Lady points out, an historic moment. It will be an inspiration to many and send a strong message that, if people have the skills and the will, high office is open to everyone. I wish him and his new team well. Along with the rest of my Government, I want to work constructively with him. I am sorry to see that, on day one, we had a cancellation of the South Uist ferry service. It is going to be unavailable in April and May, due to the fragility of the service and the lack of substitute vessels. I know the First Minister wanted to build on his predecessor's record, but I had hoped it would not be quite like that. I hope he will focus on the issues that matter to the people of Scotland and be a First Minister who fights for causes that matter, not just causes fights.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can we have a debate on the expansion of the ultra low emission zone, so that I can explain how unfair it is for the Mayor to say that public transport is a viable alternative to his £12.50 a day driving charge, when he is doing nothing to restore the routes of the 84 bus and the 384 bus for the people from whom they have recently been removed?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for continuing to raise this issue. This tax is having a devastating impact not just on people in London, but on those from the surrounding area and trades from further afield. It is vital that we have actual genuine options for people to make good environmental choices, and that includes public transport, by ensuring that bus services are maintained and that people can rely on public transport because it is not on strike all the time. It also means investing in the technology needed to make that transition. This is not working. The growing volume of dissent about this approach, which is just adding to businesses' and households' bills, has to cease and the issue has to be re-evaluated.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and for announcing the Back-Bench business for the week after the Easter recess. I give her advance notice that we intend to put on two debates on Thursday 27 April—one on NHS dentistry and the second on reducing plastic pollution in our seas and oceans.

Could I remind Members across the House that they can apply for BackBench Business debates? They can pick up a form in the Table Office or email our Backbench Business Committee Clerks. Quite often, Members like to put in applications for commemorative days. If they are interested in any of these subjects, a number of commemorative days are coming up in May and June, such as United Nations Global Road Safety Week, World Bee Day, World No Tobacco Day, World Blood Donor Day and International Asteroid Day. If Members are interested in any of those subjects, I ask them please to pick up a form and send in an application to the Backbench Business Committee.

Speaking as the Chair of the Committee, I do not like to get overtly party political, but having spent 27 years in local government as a councillor prior to coming into this House, I was struck by the Leader of the House's comments on council tax. I would just point out to her that Labour councils, particularly those in the north of England, on average have a much lower council tax base than the national average, and the band D national median is totally meaningless. Having a low council tax base means that they rely much more heavily on the revenue support grant, and when that revenue support grant is unilaterally withdrawn but nothing is done to compensate for it by reforming council tax, it leaves local authorities in dire straits. My local authority in Gateshead has lost £170 million per year since I was deputy leader of the council in 2010. I am afraid to say that we really do need a debate in Government time about the reform of council tax.

With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, can I wish you a happy Easter? I wish the Leader of the House, Members and staff across the House a happy Easter. I hope they have a very restful recess.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very helpful advertisement for forthcoming Backbench Business debates and for encouraging Members to apply for them. I also have some good news for him with regard to a previous matter he and other Members have raised on the complexity of the many energy support

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schemes that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is overseeing. These are complex schemes, and he has had some casework related to them. I am pleased to be able to tell the House that that Department will commence weekly surgeries for Members and their casework teams on energy schemes. They will begin from the first week back after recess, either on a Tuesday or a Wednesday to maximise the chance of Members being able to attend. They will be in person in Portcullis House and officials will be on hand to deal with the complex areas of the schemes with which Members need help.

I shall not get into a further fight about local government efficiencies and who I would rather have running my local authority, except to say that those who have a Conservative council are likely to be paying £80 less for the services they receive.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Was the Leader of the House as appalled as I was about the scenes of celebration in the Ugandan Parliament when legislation was passed to further criminalise LGBT members of the community and those who support them? Will she ensure that, when the House returns, the Foreign Secretary makes a statement on what representations this Government are making to the President of Uganda on that legislation, which further undermines human rights, and on what steps we are taking to support those brave people who promote the rights of the LGBT community in Uganda?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this incredibly important matter, which I know many Members will be concerned about. As he knows, there will be Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on 2 May, but given that that is a little way off, I shall make sure that the Foreign Secretary has heard his concerns today. I know the Foreign Secretary and his Ministers and our network overseas take many opportunities to raise their concerns about these matters and other human rights abuses, which is what this legislation is. We also recognise the impact it has on other areas for that country, including its economic development. It will stifle investment in that nation; companies will not want to invest or set up businesses there under that kind of environment. It is an incredibly serious matter.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am glad the Leader of the House has pledged to publish the list of Ministers, but there is no point in publishing it if they do not reply to correspondence. I wrote to the Culture Secretary on 7 September last year as chair of the all-party group on music about our report "Let the music move" and never got a reply. After much prompting, I finally tabled a written parliamentary question on 8 February asking when Ministers would reply to my letter. The answer came on 20 February saying that they would reply to the correspondence "as soon as possible." Does the Leader of the House think there is any chance I might get a substantive answer—even now I still have not had one—some time this decade?

Penny Mordaunt: I have no argument with the hon. Gentleman's point. Correspondence should be timely; sometimes on rare occasions there are reasons why it is slightly delayed—most Members want substantive answers as opposed to just timely ones—but the situation he has described is not appropriate. I will be very happy to follow up on his behalf in getting the answers he needs.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Will the Leader of the House consider providing Government time for a debate on the importance of local crime and antisocial behaviour plans? In the week the Government launched their own action plan for England, I published my own crime and antisocial behaviour plan for the Westminster part of my constituency, with five points including more police on the street and a zero-tolerance approach to drug dealing and drug taking. Thousands of people responded to my survey. It is really important that we debate local crime and antisocial behaviour plans in this place.

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her work, which is a clear example of her wanting to respond to the concerns of her constituents. The report she published is timely, given that we have just published our antisocial behaviour plan. It will introduce tougher punishments, cracking down in particular on illegal drugs; increase police and uniformed presence; and introduce higher fines and some new tools to enable law enforcement to have a good programme to crack down on antisocial behaviour. She is right that there are additional challenges in London, with crimes rates higher under the Mayor of London's scheme, but I am certain that her plan will help her constituents.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, wish everybody across the House a happy Easter recess, including those who have local elections in their patch. Happy door-knocking!

Opening a new oilfield at Rosebank would fly in the face of the UK's climate commitments. It would produce 200 million tonnes of carbon dioxide and most of the oil will be destined for export, so it would not even contribute to the UK's energy security. Despite that, *The Times* reports today that Rosebank will clear a major regulatory hurdle today. Can the Government please be open and transparent about this? Will the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero make a statement to the House about the progress of the application, including how it would sit alongside the UK's climate commitments?

Penny Mordaunt: I encourage the hon. Lady to make use of the next available questions, which are on 18 April. She will know that we have published a new strategy on energy security. We are looking to meet our net zero commitments as well as to ensure that the nation is as resilient as possible. That includes a greater focus on nuclear power. I encourage her to look at that very detailed document, which sets out how we will achieve those twin objectives.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): I have been requesting a debate on the World Health Organisation post-pandemic treaty for several months, so I am delighted that we will be having one on 17 April. It was secured only after a successful public petition obtained more than 156,000 signatures. Even more concerning than the treaty itself, which requires a vote of both Houses to be binding, are proposed changes to

the WHO international health regulations, which will not require a vote. May we therefore urgently have a Government statement on the proposed changes, which look set to hand over huge powers to an unelected, unaccountable and discredited supranational body, which is hugely funded by the same people who fund big pharma?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. A debate has been secured and he will know how to raise concerns about such matters with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and other Departments. It is incredibly important that we have the facts in the public domain—whether on such treaties or about vaccines and so forth. I would just again caution the hon. Gentleman, who this week has been inviting us to "join the dots", promoting that Anthony Fauci created covid in the United States and then offshored that operation to Wuhan. Also, in Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions prior to this session, he started a new campaign to tell the public that the Government and their international network of World Economic Forum stooges are encouraging everyone to eat insects. Those are outrageous conspiracy theories that the hon. Gentleman is promoting on his social media and, more frequently, on the Floor of the House. I urge him to check his behaviour.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): Parkinson's UK estimates that 5,360 people live with Parkinson's in the Greater Manchester health and social care partnership area, and 630 people a year are expected to be diagnosed. Shockingly, there is only one nurse supporting people in my constituency with Parkinson's, and one left some time ago. The post has been advertised several times over the past few months, but has yet to be filled. This is deeply concerning, given the ageing population and the increase in the prevalence of progressive conditions such as Parkinson's, the fastest-growing neurological condition in the world. We were promised an NHS workforce plan in the autumn statement but it is now long overdue. World Parkinson's Day is on 11 April this year. As such, will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on how the forthcoming NHS workforce plan will meet the needs of people with complex progressive conditions such as Parkinson's? Will she urge the Health Secretary to finally publish the long-awaited NHS workforce plan?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for shining a spotlight on this important disease. He will know how to secure a debate in the usual way, such as an Adjournment debate, and I am sure that the Backbench Business Committee would be interested in what he has to say, given the forthcoming awareness day. Although I will make sure that the Health Secretary has heard his remarks, I urge him to talk to his local care board about what it is doing to ensure that his constituents have the support and services that they need.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Yesterday, Jennie in my Wellingborough office had a telephone call from a lady whose son, very unfortunately, was killed in a car crash in South Africa on Monday and is being buried tomorrow. Unfortunately, she had a problem with her visa, having applied for indefinite leave to remain. Jennie rang Izzy in my office, and they started to talk to the Home Office. They had me intervene; I spoke to Emily in the Home Office, who found out who I should talk to. We got the duty officer Mark involved, who worked with my office late into the night and arranged the visa so that my constituent could travel this morning. In this House, by nature, we concentrate on things that go wrong with our system. This case clearly shows the benefit of MPs, their staff and the way that government works. Could we, for a change, have a debate in Government time about how our democracy actually works?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for giving his thanks and for name-checking those officials. Whether it is the officials in the particular services that he spoke about or the consular services that I am sure all Members have used, even in the dead of night, to assist constituents in difficulty, they do a tremendous job, as do our staff in our offices. Although I am not anticipating further examples in business questions, it is nice to hear that occasionally.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): After my constituent CarolAnn suffered a stroke, her husband updated the Department for Work and Pensions about her condition, which then issued a letter stating that her benefit was going to migrate to Social Security Scotland in May. Since then, it has done absolutely nothing to try to address her needs given her current condition, trying to palm her off to Social Security Scotland, even though it is the DWP's responsibility until May. Can the Leader of the House outline what the Government will do to make sure that the DWP treats cases with care and dignity until they migrate to Social Security Scotland?

Penny Mordaunt: As always, I will be happy to look at any case that the hon. Gentleman has not been able to resolve by other means. It is true that Scotland will be looking after more welfare services. I am pleased that it is taking up the powers that have been available to it for some time, but if any Member is having difficulty getting their situation resolved, I will be happy to assist them.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I warmly welcome the release of the Government's action plan to combat antisocial behaviour. In Harrow, more than 5,000 cases of antisocial behaviour have been reported to the council this year alone. It is the second most important crime issue that people experience and suffer. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in Government time on what we as MPs and local authorities can do to combat this problem? In Harrow, we have a consultation on a public spaces protection order to cover the whole borough, for instant action against those who commit these crimes, which would reassure people.

While I am on my feet, I remind the House that we are we celebrating not only Easter but Passover, Ramadan, Rama Navami, and Vaisakhi at the end of the recess period. All religions are included in the Easter recess.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his final remarks wishing everyone well during this incredibly important period in religious calendars, and I congratulate him on his focus on antisocial behaviour. In the year ending September 2022, there was a 35% increase in police recorded incidents of antisocial behaviour, but we want that number to continue to go down. That is

[Penny Mordaunt]

why we have announced the new antisocial behaviour plan. We look forward to working with my hon. Friend to ensure his constituents are safe and feel safe.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): In Transport questions on 2 March, I raised a question with the Rail Minister about an issue of great importance to my constituents, who are trapped in homes they urgently need to sell but cannot because they are on or near the current line of route for East West Rail. In response to my question, the Minister offered a meeting. Unfortunately, I have had no response to a request I made the same day by email. As the recess is about to start, I am unlikely to be granted a meeting before mid-April, if I am lucky, which is a month and a half after making my request. Will the Leader of the House advise me how long I am expected to wait to hear back from the Minister, who is ignoring my desperate constituents?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. I would be happy to talk to the Department and, unless he needs a physical meeting, I am sure a telephone call or a Teams meeting with the Minister could be arranged in a much shorter space of time. I will certainly make those representations to the Minister.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I start by wishing the House, its staff and, in particular, our hard-working teams a very happy Easter.

As a global maritime power, the UK has a rich and exceptional underwater cultural heritage, including the 17th century flagship the London, which sank this month 358 years ago with the loss of over 300 souls. Our rich cultural hidden heritage has the power to regenerate our coastal towns and cities, generate new jobs and contribute to the local economy. In this 50th year of the Protection of Wrecks Act 1973, please could we have a debate in Government time on how we can better protect and enhance our rich underwater cultural heritage?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is speaking to a Member of Parliament for Portsmouth, which is the home to the Mary Rose Museum, so she is preaching to the choir. The subject is incredibly important, and underwater cultural heritage can be an important source of economic regeneration to areas. I would be interested to hear about my hon. Friend's plans for the London. Many wreck sites are protected and many are grave sites as well, so raising the wrecks is not necessarily the right thing to do. I will make sure the Minister has heard her ambitions in this area; the next Department for Culture, Media and Sport questions will be on 27 April.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Many of us in this place and in my constituency of Edinburgh West get a little tired of Scotland's economic and other issues always being addressed through the narrow, negative prism of the Scottish National party. We would like to discuss the benefits and the positives of the Union, not just for Scotland but for all four nations of the United Kingdom. Will the Leader of the House consider setting aside Government time to have a debate on the benefits of the Union and how it can be used positively to address the issues of all four constituent nations?

Penny Mordaunt: That is a wonderful idea. I think it would be supported by almost all Members of this House, and our constituents would value it greatly. The overwhelming sentiment in the letters that I am sent is how passionately many people from all four nations of the United Kingdom feel about our joint history, our heritage and our family traditions and rivalries across the United Kingdom. It is not just about arguments that appeal to the head, but about arguments that appeal to the heart. It is a very good idea for a debate and would be strongly supported, I am sure.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, this year Doncaster celebrates the centenary of the Flying Scotsman. You will also know that it will not be long until our dilapidated hospital reaches the same anniversary. With a brownfield site ready to go, Doncaster could benefit from a new hospital before the Flying Scotsman turns 105. Could we therefore have a debate on hospital infrastructure? I believe that that would be a great use of time in this Chamber, not least for the people of Doncaster.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his tireless campaigning on the issue. He will know that we have received many expressions of interest for the next eight new hospitals from trusts across the country; I understand that there is one for Doncaster, his area. Those expressions of interest have now been assessed and the Government will make an announcement in due course. I am not able to give my hon. Friend any further information on that today, but I shall certainly make sure that the Secretary of State hears his championing, yet again, of his constituency.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Thank you. It is my area, too.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The register of Ministers' interests says that the right hon. Lady is the Minister of State at the Department for International Trade, but she is self-evidently the Leader of the House, and has been for 205 days. Indeed, the Department for International Trade was abolished 51 days ago. The register is not even an accurate list of Ministers now. No Department has published transparency returns on anything after the end of September, so it has been 180 days. An ordinary MP would have to register everything within 28 days.

The Leader of the House has been saying for some time that she will get this sorted—she promised the House before Christmas. So far as I can see, we are going in the wrong direction, not the right direction. Why can we not have Ministers' interests published within a week or a fortnight of their being incurred? Why can we not have it done immediately?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that we are moving to a system that will put the ministerial registration of interests, hospitality, gifts and so forth on the same footing as Parliament's. *[Interruption.]* I know that because I regularly meet the officials who are doing this work. They are still on schedule to deliver it, as the hon. Gentleman knows, by this summer.

Once those systems are created, they will enable us immediately to link through so that members of the public, our constituents and others who are searching

to see what we need to register should find that a lot easier than under the current system. The hon. Gentleman will understand that it requires a system to be built. That is ongoing. The propriety and ethics team are doing this, and I will keep him updated.

Sir Chris Bryant: You've refused to meet me.

Penny Mordaunt: No, I haven't.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Aylesbury has some absolutely fantastic places to visit this Easter. I highlighted some of them during English Tourism Week: we have a historic quarter, some great museums and even a statue of David Bowie that sings on the hour. But we also face some serious challenges, with worrying health and education inequalities and a town centre that urgently needs regeneration. Could my right hon. Friend find Government time for a debate on the need for support—whether that is levelling-up support or another means of support—for Aylesbury and towns like it across the south-east of England?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for that wonderful advert for so many things in his constituency. I know that his area will benefit from nearly £8 million of the UK's shared prosperity fund allocation. He makes an excellent suggestion for a debate; he will know how to apply for one in the usual way.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): As we head into the Easter recess, prices continue to rise and the Government have still failed to put a decent pay rise on the table for hard-working civil servants. Members of the Public and Commercial Services Union in passport offices around the country will be taking weeks of continuous strike action throughout April. Strikes are also set to take place at the Animal and Plant Health Agency, Ofgem, the British Museum, the British Library and the Government Digital Service, with further national action due at the end of April. May we have a debate in Government time on what the Government are doing to negotiate a settlement to this dispute and end poverty pay in the civil service?

Penny Mordaunt: As the hon. Lady will know, Ministers give the House frequent updates about all the pay negotiations and discussions that are taking place across many sectors. For example, the Health Secretary answered an urgent question on the subject this morning. I shall make sure that those in the Cabinet Office have heard what the hon. Lady has said today as their next questions is not until 11 May.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I have already highlighted the record-breaking achievements of my constituents who have raised funds for our excellent North Devon Hospice. May I now ask my right hon. Friend to congratulate both Jade Kingdom, the first person with Down syndrome to complete a sprint triathlon, and Max Woosey, the boy in the tent who has raised the most money ever raised by anyone camping outside? While it is marvellous that so much money is being raised for our wonderful hospice, will my right hon. Friend also help to secure a debate in Government time to ensure that the current increases in hospice energy costs do not undermine their core caring work?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure all Members will want to join in the congratulations and admiration for both Jade and Max and all that they have achieved. They have done a tremendous amount, not just through their personal achievements but in inspiring other people to step up and try things, and raise money to support good causes. As my hon. Friend will know, our energy bill relief schemes are intended to help not just businesses but organisations in the public, voluntary and charitable sectors and other non-domestic energy users, including hospices, but we will keep this under review. Hospices do a tremendous job for everyone in our community. We all appreciate and support their work, and we will do everything we can to see them through what are very difficult times.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As the country looks forward to the coronation, and given the focus on volunteering with the Big Help Out on 8 May, may I ask the Leader of the House to join me in congratulating the team at Treharris Boys & Girls Club, who will celebrate their centenary in a few days' time? Treharris is reportedly the oldest boys' and girls' club in Wales, and the passion and commitment of its volunteers has made it a huge asset to the community for generations. May we therefore have a debate in Government time on volunteering and its contribution to our community life?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very pleased to join the hon. Gentleman in sending my congratulations to his local girls' and boys' club. Let me also thank him for his advertisement for the tremendous coronation weekend that lies ahead, and, in particular, that day of civic renewal and volunteering. I hope all Members will use it to promote the incredible organisations in their constituencies, to raise money and do some good things for the community, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for speaking about it today.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): On Sunday I will be part of the Birkin's Boys team taking part in the Hunstanton soap box race to raise money for the local RNLI lifeboat station. Will my right hon. Friend wish all the participants good luck, and, as people come to the stunning north Norfolk coast for their Easter holidays, will she find time for a debate about the importance of respecting water and being safe on the beach?

Penny Mordaunt: I wish my hon. Friend good luck for the adventure that lies ahead. It sounds slightly dangerous, but I wish him well, along with all the other people who will be raising money for such a good cause. He will know that we have a national water safety forum and work with many partners to ensure that those who are enjoying the tremendous facilities that exist throughout the country, including my hon. Friend's constituency, are safe, and also know what to do if things go badly wrong. I pay tribute to all those organisations, including the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, which do such fantastic work to keep us all safe.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Despite concerns raised by the Scottish Government, the Budget allocation from Westminster saw a fall in the capital budget of 3% and a miserly 0.6% uplift, based on GDP deflator assumptions of inflation at 3.2%,

[Patricia Gibson]

when of course in reality it is much higher. Will the Leader of the House make a statement to explain in what world this could be called levelling up? What it shows is that the true way to level up Scotland is for Scotland to have full fiscal control as an independent country.

Penny Mordaunt: The facts as I understand them are that Scotland has received the largest ever settlement in its history. The dividend to taxpayers in Scotland from being part of the Union is £2,000 per head and, according to Audit Scotland, the Scottish Government have had to raid capital budgets to meet shortfalls in their revenue budget and day-to-day spending, so I think a debate on this subject is a very good idea.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): As well as wishing you a happy Easter, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I wish you a happy Cheshire day, on 30 March, when we celebrate the great people, businesses and traditions of a wonderful county in the north-west of England?

More than 6,000 people have signed a petition calling on Warrington Labour councillors to scrap the low-traffic neighbourhood in Latchford and reopen Grange Avenue to through traffic. The council, I am afraid, has dug its heels in and even today has launched another consultation, simply kicking the can down the road. Local residents are clear: the scheme has created longer drive times and increased congestion in Warrington town centre. Will the Leader of House grant a debate in Government time on how councils can encourage local people to be more active, and perhaps walk and cycle more? Instead of spending money on planters in the middle of the road, perhaps councils could spend that money on resurfacing pavements, so that local people can walk safely in their local neighbourhoods.

Penny Mordaunt: I think my hon. Friend has achieved his ambition by giving that advice with both barrels to his local authority. The responsibility lies with the local authority, and it is disappointing that it is not able to deal with the things that would really make a difference to people's lives by helping them to be more active and to walk and cycle more, and to ensure that those local services are protected. I also join him in wishing everyone a very happy Cheshire day. For an even happier Cheshire day next year, I think the conclusion is: vote Conservative.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Feeding Families is a great organisation in my constituency that gives support to families who just do not have enough to get by on. Today I heard that it is moving to much larger and much better premises in Blaydon. While that is great for Feeding Families, the volunteers and their work, it is sad that that is necessary, due to demand increasing by 100% in the last year. Can we have a debate in Government time on the measures we can take to end the need for food banks and organisations such as Feeding Families?

Penny Mordaunt: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating and thanking these incredibly important local community groups, which do so much to support our communities, particularly vulnerable and financially fragile families. She will know that we have put in place a £93 billion cost of living package and done many other things, including agreeing the largest ever uplift to the national living wage and modernising our welfare system to support families through this. However, we must also support those organisations that are often best placed to reach those who fall through the cracks, which is why we have always ensured that local authorities have leeway and particular budgets to help those local community groups.

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I understand that for the last two years Dementia UK has funded the important work of Admiral nurses across Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. That funding is due to end tomorrow. Although the local integrated care board and the local primary care networks have agreed to fund the service in some areas, I am told that that does not include Charnwood, which has Loughborough within it. Without that funding, the service covering my constituency will close immediately. Given that there are more than 2,500 people living with dementia locally, the loss of the Admiral nurse service will have a huge knock-on impact. I am keen to understand why some parts of an integrated care board area can receive services while others cannot. I would also welcome the Leader of the House's advice on the best and quickest way to bring this matter to the Government's attention, to find a solution.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. She knows it is the integrated care board's responsibility to ensure that needs are met, and that the right services are commissioned. Having raised the matter today, she is exhausting all the avenues open to her in this place. She can obviously apply for a debate, too, but the integrated care board needs to change its mind, and I hope it is listening to what she has had to say today.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Secretary has told Channel 4 FactCheck that he intends to correct the record, following his use at yesterday's Prime Minister's questions of an incorrectly low figure for rape convictions. Given the prominence and significance of the error, it would surely be inadequate were this to be done through a written ministerial correction squirrelled away at the back of *Hansard*. Will the Leader of the House persuade her Cabinet colleague to do the decent thing and come to this House, speedily and in person, to rectify his error?

Penny Mordaunt: If a Member needs to correct the record, it is right that they do so in a timely way, and there are established procedures for doing that. The Justice Secretary is a man of his word and, if he has said that he will do something, he will do it. I will leave it up to him how he does that.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Chelsea football club was sold under special exemption in May 2022, and at least £2.3 billion of the proceeds was placed in Roman Abramovich's frozen UK bank account, with the expectation that the funds will be sent to support Ukrainians. In November, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), said the funds would soon be on their way. In January, there were news reports that the Government were close to handing over this money to a new foundation for Ukrainians, but earlier this month the Minister said

"Setting up an organisation of this scale rightly takes time."

We have no update. Given that we are almost a year on from the sale, and given that a third of the UK's aid budget is being used in the UK to support refugees, including Ukrainians, can we have a ministerial statement to clarify the timescale so that the money can go to those who need it as soon as possible?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important issue. It is clear what needs to happen. Given that the next Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions are not until 2 May, I will make sure the Foreign Secretary has heard what she said. The Treasury will also have an interest, as it needs to make sure everything is done correctly. I will make sure both Departments have heard what she said today.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Many of my most vulnerable and unwell constituents are seeing their personal independence payment renewals turned down after just a telephone interview. The latest case will see a very unwell and isolated woman lose her car tomorrow, while she waits months for her appeal to be heard. Given her condition, I suspect her appeal will be upheld. Can the Leader of the House help?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear of this case. When hon. and right hon. Members have exhausted all the usual routes, I am happy to intervene to ensure that cases are addressed. I may have saved myself the price of a stamp, as the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is here on the Treasury Bench. Having worked in the Department for Work and Pensions, I know its staff are very keen to ensure that such situations are addressed.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Last year, there was a net loss of 14,000 social-rent properties in this country. Locally, the Conservative-led Warwick District Council promised to build a development of 42 social-rent properties, which has never happened. There was also the development of Warwick Place as a site for social-rent housing. Can we therefore have a debate in Government time on the much-needed supply of social-rent housing in this country, given the housing crisis we face?

Penny Mordaunt: Annual housing supply is up by 10% on previous years, with more than 232,000 net additional homes delivered in 2021-22. That is the third highest yearly rate for the past 30 years. We have had an unprecedented amount of investment in social housing, but I shall make sure that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has heard the hon. Gentleman's concerns and will ask him to contact his office.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): May I just caution the Leader of the House that the Home Office has form when it comes to impact assessments? It made all the same promises in relation to the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, but no assessment was ever published. The Home Office has now turned down my freedom of information request for the impact assessment on the new Bill, acknowledging that it exists but saying, yet again, that it will be published in due course. When she spoke to the Home Office, was she given a reason why the impact assessment had not been published prior to this week's Committee proceedings? Was she given a cast-iron assurance that it will be published before we consider the final stages of the Bill later this month?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will perhaps have heard my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister say in Tuesday's debate that the Home Office's intention is to publish an impact assessment on the Bill. So it is clear from the Home Office that it intends to do that. I completely accept that it is of more use if that is done earlier rather than later. As I say, we have made representations to Ministers and my officials have spoken to the permanent secretary of that Department.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am grateful to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for announcing that there is going to be a debate on NHS dentistry, because clearly a lot of Members are concerned about that issue, but may we also please have a statement on children's access to orthodontic services? In the past couple of weeks, a couple of constituents have contacted me with concerning issues that they have raised regarding their children. One has been told that there is a three-year wait for a referral to an orthodontist, when their dentist has told them that action needs to be taken within 12 months otherwise it will not work. Another has been told that they cannot have the work required because sedation is no longer available for children. So may we have a statement from the relevant Minister on what is going to happen to improve access for children to orthodontic services?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a matter that is particularly important after the backlog that has built up in such services during covid and the absence of such services during covid, particularly for children in care and other vulnerable children. Services are improving across the country, and certainly services for those children should be in place. He will know that the Department is looking at what more it can do to bolster the workforce and increase access to provision, and he can raise this issue at the next questions, which will be on 25 April.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Royal Oak in Isleworth is a popular pub that is run by a family, but it is being put under huge financial pressure because of the high cost of its gas and electricity bills. Having been forced to sign a new energy contract last autumn, they are stuck paying four times what they were paying last year for energy and they cannot afford it. Despite energy prices tumbling since they signed, British Gas has refused even to review their fixed-term contract. They are now facing closure because of the actions of British Gas, which will not get anything if a small business such as this one goes under. Does the Leader of the House agree that the actions of British Gas are unacceptable and harmful to small businesses? Will she find time for a debate about how we can support our pubs and other small businesses that are stuck with these exorbitant new fixed-term contracts?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important case. It does sound extremely unfair that British Gas will not engage with that business, as she describes—it sounds very un-British of British Gas to

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do that. I hope that British Gas will have heard what she has said, look at this case and see whether it can find a way through to ensure that that business can continue operating. I congratulate her on raising this matter this afternoon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I take this opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker, to wish you and all Members of the House a very happy Easter?

I know that I raise these issues every week, and the Leader of the House always responds in a positive and respectful manner, which I appreciate on behalf of all those people whom we may never meet, but who we think of here every week. I think of the 27 Christians who were killed in northern Nigeria and the hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs in arbitrary detention in China.

Today, I wish to focus on a prominent Afghan campaigner for female education, Matiullah Wesa, who was arrested by the Taliban. The denial of education to women and girls in the country is abhorrent to us here and to people across the world and has a devastating effect on everyone, including on Afghanistan's threatened religious minorities. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging the Taliban to release Matiullah Wesa and fulfil a promise of reopening schools and universities to women and girls?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Member not just for his kind remarks, but, again, for giving a voice to those people whom many Members of this House will be concerned about—whether they are in China, Nigeria, or Afghanistan or are organisations that are working to support those people. They are very much in our minds, and we will continue to focus on their plight. I will just add that, yesterday, a number of parliamentarians joined me in meeting advocates and organisations that are working to protect democracy and women's rights around the world, with a particular focus on Afghanistan, Iran and elsewhere. We did a workshop together to see what more we can do to provide Members of this House with opportunities to support those organisations in a much more profound way—how we can organise ourselves better here. It is not just about networks globally, but about organisations working in the UK to protect vulnerable women, too. I plan to update the House on some new initiatives later this year, which I hope Members will welcome.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Leader of the House for answering the business questions.

State Pension Age: Review

12.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the second review of the state pension age, which I am publishing today.

The purpose of this review has been to determine whether the existing rules about pensionable age remain appropriate, as required by the Pensions Act 2014. Two reports commissioned by the Government have formed part of the evidence base: one from the Government Actuary and an independent report led by Baroness Neville-Rolfe, both of which I am publishing alongside this review.

l am grateful to both the Government Actuary and to Baroness Neville-Rolfe for their thoughtful and valuable reports. I would also like to thank those who responded to the call for evidence that informed the independent report.

As today's review underlines, this Government are committed to providing dignity and security in retirement and to delivering the certainty that people need to plan for later life. It also highlights the importance of ensuring that we have the best available evidence before making decisions about the course of the state pension age that impacts millions of people.

It is thanks to the measures that this Conservative Government have taken that there are now 200,000 fewer pensioners in absolute poverty than there were in 2009-10. This year, we are projected to spend around £117 billion on state pension-related expenditure. Next month will see the state pension's biggest ever increase, and, as a result, the new state pension will surpass £10,000 a year for the first time.

I want to make sure that the state pension in this country continues to be the foundation of income in retirement for future generations, while also being sustainable and fair. I welcome Baroness Neville-Rolfe's independent report. It highlights an important challenge: a growing pensioner-age population and the affordability and fiscal sustainability of the state pension. It also looks at how we can balance that with our commitment to providing fairness between the generations.

As a society, we should celebrate improvements in life expectancy, which has risen rapidly over the past century and is projected to continue to increase. Since the first state pension age review was undertaken in 2017, however, the increase in life expectancy has slowed. In fact, the rapid rises in life expectancy seen over the last century have slowed over the past decade, a trend seen to a varying degree across much of the developed world. For most people and communities, people alive today are expected to live longer than their predecessors. Life expectancy is still projected to improve over time but, compared with the last review of state pension age, those improvements are expected to be achieved at a slower rate.

Having had regard to the relevant factors, I agree with the independent report's conclusion that the planned rise in the state pension age from 66 to 67 should occur between 2026 and 2028 and that that rise is appropriate. It has been in legislation since 2014 and will continue to give certainty to those planning their retirement.

I have noted the independent report's recommendations that the rise from 67 to 68 should take place between 2041 and 2043. That is four years later than the first independent reviewer, John Cridland, proposed in 2017—a proposal that the Government accepted, subject to a further review—but three years ahead of what is provided for in legislation. However, Baroness Neville-Rolfe was not able to take into account the long-term impact of recent significant external challenges, including the covid-19 pandemic and global inflation caused by Putin's illegal war in Ukraine.

The Government Actuary also notes the challenges of assessing long-term mortality trends, particularly in the context of the covid-19 pandemic. He states that,

"relatively minor changes in the mortality assumptions can result in fairly large changes to the calculated State Pension age timetable".

Given the level of uncertainty about the data on life expectancy, labour markets and the public finances, and the significance of these decisions on the lives of millions of people, I am mindful that a different decision might be more appropriate once those factors are clearer.

I therefore plan for a further review to be undertaken within two years of the next Parliament to consider the rise to age 68 again. That will ensure that the Government are able to consider the latest information, including life expectancy and population projections that reflect the findings of the 2021 census data, the latest demographic trends and the current economic situation. We will also be able to consider the impact on the labour market of the measures we have announced to increase workforce participation and of any other relevant factors.

The current rules for the rise from 67 to 68 therefore remain appropriate and the Government do not intend to change the existing legislation prior to the conclusion of the next review. All options that meet the 10-year notice period will be in scope at the next review. The Government remain committed to the principle of 10 years' notice of changes to state pension age and will ensure that any legislation can be brought forward in a timely manner.

The approach I am setting out today is a responsible and reasonable one—one that continues to provide certainty for those planning for retirement, while ensuring that we take the time to get this right for the longer term so that the state pension can continue to provide security in retirement and is sustainable and fair across the generations.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.13 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and thank Baroness Neville-Rolfe and the Government Actuary for their reports.

The Opposition agree that it is not the right time to accelerate a rise in the state pension age, although I note that five years or so ago the then Secretary of State announced that it was explicit Government policy to bring forward the increase in the state pension age to 68 between 2037 and 2039. When objections were raised on the grounds of life expectancy trends, the Government said that such objections were irresponsible and reckless. They told us that bringing forward an increase was necessary for the long-term sustainability of the public finances. Now it turns out that, with a general election only a year or so away and the Government trailing so badly in the polls, abandoning the accelerated rise in the state pension age is not so reckless and irresponsible after all.

Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the review he has announced will still consider bringing forward an increase in the state retirement age to 2037? Does that remain the Government's policy ambition, or is that now abandoned?

The Secretary of State cites life expectancy trends. It is certainly true that our trends were hit hard by the pandemic, but that is because life expectancy improvements were slowing before the pandemic. The life expectancy gap between the richest and poorest communities was widening before the pandemic, and—disgracefully and shamefully—in around one in five of the poorest areas for women and one in nine of the poorest areas for men, life expectancy went backwards from 2014 to 2019. He should have acknowledged that today.

The ongoing stalling of life expectancy is out of kilter with many of our European competitors. It is much more dramatic and it means that, in a city such as Manchester, Middlesbrough or Liverpool or a town such as Blackpool, life expectancy for men is nine to 10 years lower and for women eight years lower than in the wealthiest parts of Chelsea or Westminster. In Glasgow, as *The Sunday Post* recently warned, one in four men will die before their 65th birthday. That is a quite shameful record.

Why do the Government think, after 13 years, life expectancy trends have become so dismal in the United Kingdom? It is not just because so many more people are waiting for treatment in the NHS, or cannot access health check-ups for blood pressure, cardiovascular disease or cancers. It is not simply because smoking cessation services have been so cut under this Government. It is not simply because mental health services are overwhelmed, addiction services have been cut back and we are now seeing the phenomena of deaths of despair in the UK. It is not simply because social care provision has been so savaged. It is also because poverty makes people ill quicker and it means people die sooner.

After 13 years, wages are stagnant and jobs insecure. Too much housing in the private rented sector is damp and squalid. Today, there are 400,000 more pensioners in relative poverty, 1 million more children in poverty and half a million children destitute, without a bed to sleep in tonight or a hot dinner in their stomach, after 13 years of the Conservatives.

Today's announcement that the Government are not going ahead with accelerating the state pension age rise is welcome, and it is the right decision, but it is the clearest admission yet that a rising tide of poverty is dragging life expectancy down for so many. Life expectancy that is stalling—even going backwards in some of the poorest communities—is a damning indictment of 13 years of failure, which the Minister should have acknowledged and apologised for today.

Mel Stride: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has broadly welcomed the decisions that I set out in my statement. I will address a couple of the points he raises. On poverty and, as we are particularly focused on pensioners, pensioner poverty, the situation has improved. The poverty situation has improved right across the

[Mel Stride]

board since 2009-10, with some dramatic reductions to both absolute and relative poverty levels across that period, not least because of the policies pursued by this Government. He suggests we are something of an outlier in terms of the flattening of the increase in the expectations of length of life in future. That is simply not the case; as I said earlier, it is an international phenomenon.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a couple of questions I would like to address. First, he asked whether a move of the rise of the pension age to 68 was possible, along the lines of the Cridland recommendations of 2037 to 2039. Given we have made a commitment to a 10-year notice period, that would suggest that, if the next review —and I say if, because that is for others to decide in the course of time—were in, say, 2026, that would indeed make those dates possible. Of course, it would not preclude decisions being taken for dates further out than 2037 to 2039.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asks what our policy is at the moment. We are very clear what our policy is: the current legislative position is appropriate, but there will be a review within the first two years of the next Parliament.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Unlike the Labour party, I do not welcome this decision. From the 1940s to today, life expectancy from retirement has increased by seven years, which would indicate a retirement age of 72 rather than of 67 or 68. The benefit of long-term decision making is that it gives everybody the chance to plan well in advance. Delaying the decision is a decision in itself, and it is not exactly a sign of strength.

Mel Stride: I hear what my right hon. Friend says. As I set out in my statement, there are a number of uncertainties, some of which are in the fiscal sphere. In fact, if he reads pages 13 and 14 of the Office for Budget Responsibility economic and fiscal outlook, he will see what the OBR has to say about the uncertainty of the public finances around labour supply, energy prices and, indeed, interest rates. For that reason, among others, I believe it appropriate to wait until we are more certain about what the future holds.

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

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. The Work and Pensions Committee called on the Government to publish the reports by Baroness Neville-Rolfe and the Government Actuary, which have been used to inform the review of the state pension age, and it is regrettable that that did not happen in good time. I am sure that many of us are left wondering why the Government did not publish those reports earlier to allow proper parliamentary scrutiny and a more informed decision. Is it not the case that this is a political decision because this Government, who are at the end of their days, do not want another fight before the next general election?

We in the SNP oppose further increases to the state pension age. We are glad that life expectancy is now finally being factored into the wider consideration of what is an appropriate state pension. The reality is that Tory austerity, followed by covid, has caused an overall reduction in average life expectancy figures. The UK has one of the worst state pensions in western Europe; too many pensioners in Scotland live in poverty, which is a damning indictment in what is supposed to be the sixth largest economy on the planet. Is the Secretary of State not embarrassed that pensioners on these islands have to choose between heating and eating in 21st century Britain? He talks about a reduction in poverty rates, but that is because the Government are using lagged data to analyse poverty rates and ignoring the cost of living crisis that is on us now. With 7 million households in fuel poverty, the Government cannot talk about poverty rates decreasing.

There is evidence that increasing the state pension age from 65 to 66 caused absolute poverty rates to rise. Has the Secretary of State seen the Institute for Fiscal Studies report on that and, if so, has it been part of the decision-making process? What lessons has he learned from the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign about raising the state pension age for women born in the '50s? When will they see some compensation?

Finally, we look forward to an independent Scotland being the best place to grow old in prosperity, not in poverty with a Westminster Government we did not vote for.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises several points. First, on the publication of Baroness Neville-Rolfe's report, I have always been clear that we would publish that at or around the time that my report of the review was released, and that is precisely what we have done, including by giving advance sight of my report and her report to the Opposition.

I believe that the hon. Gentleman's remarks about pensioner poverty are misplaced. Pensioner poverty has fallen since 2009-10, as has poverty across other cohorts of the economy. He will, of course, be aware of the huge amount that this Government have been doing by way of intervention to ensure that we support low-income households, and pensioners up and down this country—many millions of them—with billions of pounds of targeted transfer payments, which will be going out over the coming months.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman mentioned the WASPI women. He will know that I am not able to comment on that matter as it is subject to a current inquiry by the parliamentary ombudsman.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What would be the saving were the Government to raise the age by one year to 68?

Mel Stride: That is a beautiful question because it is precise; it requires an answer that one cannot duck. I will write to my right hon. Friend with that information.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am grateful for early sight of the statement. I understand why the Secretary of State has chosen to defer the key decision. Like John Cridland's independent review six years ago, Baroness Neville-Rolfe's report should have been published

soon after the Department received it six months ago, rather than kept needlessly under wraps until today. John Cridland proposed early access to pension credit. Will the Secretary of State consider leaving access to pension credit at age 66 when the state pension age rises to 67 in three years' time?

Mel Stride: The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of when Baroness Neville-Rolfe's report was published. We had a fairly detailed discussion about that when I appeared before his Committee yesterday, so he knows my arguments around that. It is something that I certainly would not rule out for future reviews as a perfectly reasonable practice, but he knows the reasons it did not happen on this occasion. In terms of early access to pension credit, that is not something that the Government are currently planning—nor was it something that previous Governments planned to do at any stage—but of course, as with all matters around pensions, we will keep that under review.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the various spurious claims that have been made by those who support Scottish independence not just about the amount that would be paid in future for pensions but about who would pay it? Does he agree that the best way to achieve long-term security for Scottish pensioners is for Scotland to remain at the heart of the United Kingdom?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. What matters for sustaining a fair and just pension system is a strong economy. We are stronger together, and if we continue to work together—all the nations of the United Kingdom—we can continue to afford decent pensions for our pensioners.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The statement has provided clarity on when somebody will receive their state pension—the age of 67—but we also need to focus on what people will receive. The Government's response to the Future Pension Centre backlogs, and people's absolute inability to get through for advice on whether to top up their national insurance credits before the 5 April deadline, was just to move the deadline back by four months. That remains woefully inadequate, and it is clear that that will have to be extended again. Will the Secretary of State commit to extending the deadline to April 2025, as I asked for in the first place?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As she acknowledges, there has been an extension to the deadline, and the reasons for that were in the very point she made about waiting times and so on. We are keeping that under review—I can say no more than that—and we are also increasing the amount of resources going into telephony to resolve the issues.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are real complexities in understanding life expectancy? From listening to the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), one would think that it was very easy to understand. The Secretary of State is my constituency neighbour, and the difference in life expectancy between the north and south of our county is over 10 years, with the lowest being in my patch—it is incredibly complex. Does he agree that setting the state pension age is also a complex process, and that it should be set through data-led decision making rather than political point scoring by the Opposition?

Mel Stride: I agree with my hon. Friend and neighbour. She is absolutely right that we need to use the best possible data that we have, which is precisely why we have taken the decision that we have, and I am pleased that the Opposition have welcomed it.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am sure that it is always a relief for a member of this Government to postpone an unpopular decision, especially in the light of what we have seen in France. Like the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), I am curious about the likely impact on Treasury calculations and whether it has been factored into recent projections.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will know that fiscal sustainability is one of the key issues that we examine in coming to these conclusions and in the work carried out by the independent assessor of these matters. If he has further specific questions about the impact of one particular set of decisions on the fiscal outlook over and above any other, I am happy to discuss those with him outside the Chamber.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement, because we are trying to encourage people to save for their old age and retirement, and it is important that people get as much notice as possible. However, there is a dilemma right now. One of my constituents contacted me to say that she had been saving £1,500 a month for her retirement, which was fixed for September 2022 when she was 67, but by the time she came to realise her pension, it had dropped by £25,000, so she was no longer able to retire. Worse still, she wanted to replace her car so that she could be compliant with the ultra low emission zone because of the Mayor of London's ULEZ extension, but she can no longer afford to do so.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend has landed a very important point, as I think he knows, and I will leave it there.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Some 31% of pre-state pension age households have no savings at all. Will the Government finally establish an independent pensions and savings commission to ensure that pension policies are fit for purpose, and if not, why not?

Mel Stride: I have already identified that we have been bearing down on pensioner poverty. We have stuck with our manifesto commitment to the triple lock, which has seen pensions rise to historically high levels. This is the party that stands firmly behind pensioners.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Blackpool has the lowest life expectancy in England, with men on average living five years less than the national average. Shockingly, in some wards in my constituency, male life expectancy is 13 years lower than the national average. So that people in all parts of the UK can enjoy a broadly similar retirement period and the state pension

[Scott Benton]

remains fair for all, does the Secretary of State agree that we must redouble our efforts to reduce such large inequalities in health across this country?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is right, and that is why the Government are majoring so hard on the levelling-up agenda. He is right to point to the different life expectancies between regions and, indeed, within regions; there are sometimes stark differences between cities and towns. That is the kind of element that will need to be looked at again when the next review occurs.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows well that pensioners are much more susceptible to rises in the cost of living because they are often on fixed incomes. On behalf of the more than 18,000 pensioners in Southend West, I simply thank my right hon. Friend and this Government for delivering the biggest ever increase in the state pension, which is going up by over 10% in just a few days' time.

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for that observation. She is quite right: we have stood by our pensioners. There will be a further £300 cost of living payment to pensioners alongside the winter fuel allowance. We are encouraging as many pensioners as possible who qualify to apply for pension credit, which is worth £3,500 on average. That, in turn, passports pensioners on to £900 of payments in three instalments over the coming year.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): People in France are taking to the streets to protest against proposals to raise the state pension age to 64, yet in the UK people are expected to simply accept, despite today's announcement, that the pension age should continue to rise, perhaps even to 70 or older by the mid-2050s. Given the poverty into which women born in the 1950s were thrown when their pension age was raised with little or no notice, and the fact that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has warned of a "pensioner poverty time bomb", can the Secretary of State explain what consideration is given to rising levels of pensioner poverty—it is currently at 2.1 million, although he is seeking to deny that—when decisions are made about raising the state pension age?

Mel Stride: I set out in my previous response a number of the measures the Government have taken to make sure we look after our pensioners. I have also made it clear that since 2009-10, pensioner poverty has decreased.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. A number of people in my constituency work in the construction sector and manual labour. To expect someone in their late 60s to work in a manual labour job is simply impractical and unworkable, so I support the Government's temporary stay of execution on this increase, so that people can retire when they have some semblance of health and strength to enjoy life. However, this again underlines the unfair treatment of the WASPI women born in the '50s. I noted the Secretary of State's response on that issue, but it would be unfair of me not to make that comment on behalf of the many constituents who have contacted me. May I gently ask him to act on their behalf, to ensure that there is fairness and parity?

Mel Stride: As the hon. Gentleman recognised, I am not in a position to comment on the matter he raised, as it is before the ombudsman at the moment, but his comments will have been heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to questions for just short of half an hour.

Powering Up Britain

12.36 pm

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): For much of the past 50 years, since the oil crises of the 1970s, we have taken cheap, plentiful energy for granted. Indeed, one of the catalysts for Britain's economic transformation over that period has been affordable, abundant energy powering our homes, infrastructure, businesses and industry. Yet today, this cornerstone of our prosperity is under threat. Putin's illegal war in Ukraine and decades of overreliance on imported fossil fuels have combined to push up energy prices. Even though we have very little exposure to Russian gas, we have suffered the consequences of volatile international energy markets. That is why the Government have stepped in this winter to pay around half of the typical household energy bill, and I am pleased to say that that support was extended in the Chancellor's recent Budget.

The much bigger challenge long term is to bolster our energy resilience as a nation, so that a tyrant like Putin can never again hit the pockets of every family and business in Britain. We must diversify, decarbonise and domesticate our energy supplies to secure the cheap, clean power that Britain needs to prosper in the future. That is why last month the Prime Minister created the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to give these two closely entwined objectives—energy security and net zero—the full and dedicated attention within Government that they clearly merit. It was a statement of intent to put energy security among the Government's top priorities. By doing so, we will bring wholesale electricity prices down to among the cheapest in Europe by 2035, drastically reduce carbon emissions and deliver the long-term boost that our economy needs, using Britain's unique talents and assets to drive the energy transition.

Following the Department's launch just 50 days ago, I am pleased to announce how the Government will be powering up Britain, including through our energy security plan, which sets out the steps we are taking to become more energy independent by powering Britain from Britain, and through our net zero growth plan, which builds on the measures laid out in the net zero strategy to keep us on track to achieve our carbon budgets. That plan meets our statutory obligations under the Climate Change Act 2008 to respond to the Climate Change Committee's annual progress report from 2022, and sets out a package of proposals and policies that will enable carbon budgets to be met, to ensure that Britain remains the leader among the fastest decarbonising nations in the world.

Before starting on the announcements, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) for his excellent work in this area, investigating how to deliver net zero in a way that is both pro-growth and pro-business. In January, he submitted his detailed report and recommendations to Government. I can confirm that we are partly or fully acting on 23 recommendations of the independent review of net zero report's 25 recommendations for 2025. On behalf of the whole House, I thank my right hon. Friend again for his work.

Let me start on the announcements, if I may. As part of powering up Britain, the Government are launching Great British Nuclear, to put clean nuclear power at the heart of Britain's energy security and spearhead a busy programme of new nuclear projects, starting with a competitive down-selection this year to choose the best small modular reactor technologies. We are launching the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme, providing up to £160 million to kick-start funding in port infrastructure so that we can move forward with that exciting new technology, and we are publishing plans for investing in carbon capture and storage, a key area for cleaning up energy and one in which Britain can lead the world.

To drive our hydrogen ambitions, we are announcing a shortlist and funding for the first round of electrolytic hydrogen allocation, with a second round to come, and setting out our longer-term hydrogen plans. We are providing an extra £1 billion for energy efficiency upgrades through the new great British insulation scheme, and we are investing to speed up the market for heat pump installation to decarbonise home heating and leverage up to £300 million of overall funding, including private funding.

This country is already ahead of the game when it comes to decarbonising its economy. We are a global leader in offshore wind power and currently have the world's largest operational offshore wind farm project, named after a town in my constituency: Hornsea 2. We also have the second, third and fourth largest offshore wind farm projects, but the measures we are unveiling today will accelerate our transition, rolling out existing technologies and bringing transformative new technologies to market.

We are truly on the verge of a new industrial revolution, but just like the first industrial revolution, investment will be key to our success, delivering not just energy security and ambitious reductions in carbon but the jobs, exports and productivity gains of the future. With that in mind, we are publishing today a new green finance strategy, which sets out a range of measures to mobilise private investment into net zero. That will support the UK in maintaining its position as a world-leading centre for green finance, and it sets us on a pathway to becoming the world's first net zero-aligned financial centre.

It is imperative that we do not just focus on reducing emissions at home. The UK will work with international partners through the green transition to share the benefits of an improved environment that is good for business, because all economies need to take decisive steps to reduce their emissions. Indeed, increased investment in net zero technologies globally will unlock innovation and drive costs down, as well as create opportunities for green UK exports—in carbon capture and hydrogen, for example.

As such, today we are publishing two additional documents. The first is the 2030 strategic framework for international climate and nature action, which outlines our vision to halve global emissions, halt and reverse nature loss, and build resilience to climate impacts this decade. The second is the international climate finance strategy, which details our commitment to £11.6 billion of international climate finance up to 2025-26, after we pledged to double it. Both reinforce our climate leadership during what is a critical decade for delivery, showing that Britain is credible and committed to meeting its promises.

It is no exaggeration to say that Britain's prospects as a nation, our ability to compete as an economy, and our capacity to decarbonise and tackle climate change all

[Graham Stuart]

depend on energy security. Now, with a dedicated Department to deliver that vital objective, we will not only wean ourselves off fossil fuel imports but deliver cheaper, cleaner energy from domestic renewables and nuclear, protecting British households from turbulent international energy markets and creating hundreds of thousands of green jobs to level up Britain in the process. Making Britain an energy secure, net zero nation is one of the greatest opportunities of our time. Today, we have shown how we will grasp that opportunity for the benefit of everyone in this country for generations to come.

12.45 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, but let me tell him that although there may have been thousands of pages published this morning, this is not the green day that the Government promised, but a groundhog day of reannouncements, reheated policy and no new investment. The documents are most notable for their glaring omissions: there is no removal of the onshore wind ban that is costing families hundreds of pounds on bills a year. There is no new money for energy efficiency to insulate homes and cut bills, just a reannouncement of a feeble offer made last year. There is no net zero mandate for Ofgem, as recommended by the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore)—to whom I too pay tribute—and as demanded by industry. There is no proper response to the Inflation Reduction Act, even as the rest of the world speeds ahead.

The biggest indictment of all, buried in the fine print and not mentioned by the Minister, is the admission that the policies announced today do not deliver the promise, solemnly made in front of the world at COP26 in Glasgow barely a year ago, to meet the UK's 2030 climate target. The Government waited until noon, five hours after all the other documents were published, to release the carbon budget delivery plan—which is more like the failure to deliver the carbon budget plan. This is what it says:

> "We have quantified emissions savings to deliver…92% of the NDC."

A target for less than seven years' time, and now almost 10% off—what an indictment of all the verbiage we have heard today. All the policies and all the hot air do not meet the promise that the Government made on the world stage under the presidency of the right hon. Member for Reading West (Sir Alok Sharma), to whom I also pay tribute. That means higher bills, energy insecurity, fewer jobs and climate failure.

Let me ask the Minister five questions. First, if the Government really wanted a sprint for clean power, they would go for onshore wind. They even promised to lift the ban last December, but the proposals in their consultation have been written off by industry as doing

> "almost nothing to lift the draconian ban".

The previous Business Secretary, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)—hardly an eco-warrior—promised to bring the planning regime for onshore wind into line with other infrastructure. Why will the Minister not take that step?

Secondly, there is no new investment in hydrogen. Germany is investing €9 billion in hydrogen, compared with £240 million from the UK. Does the Minister recognise the failure of ambition? Thirdly, it is good that the Government have finally allocated some resources to CCS, although I am old enough to remember the £1 billion CCS competition announced in 2008, 15 years ago, which they cancelled. However, they still appear to have no clue where the up to £20 billion of support is coming from, and it was not in the Budget documents. Can the Minister clear that up?

Fourthly, on the response to the Inflation Reduction Act, British businesses are crying out for action now, yet the Minister's own documents published today show that the UK is investing less than France and less than Germany, and once the Inflation Reduction Act kicks in, we will be investing less than the USA. Is that not a clear admission that we are falling behind? Finally, can the Minister confirm from the Dispatch Box that as I said, the Government's 2030 target announced at COP26 will not be met by these policies, and can he tell us how the UK can possibly claim the mantle of delivering on climate leadership when it is way off track to deliver the promise it made at the COP we hosted?

At the same time, the Government pursue their "every last drop" strategy on oil and gas. Let me tell the House what that means: it means funnelling £11.4 billion to the oil and gas companies making record profits, and ignoring what 700 leading scientists told the Government yesterday, which is that new exploration will not cut bills, will not deliver energy security and will severely undermine UK climate leadership. *[Interruption.]* I think the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) should listen to the scientists.

We know what a proper plan looks like: in 2030, zero carbon power; insulating 19 million cold, draughty homes in a decade; GB Energy to invest in all forms of low-carbon generation; and a national wealth fund investing in everything from clean steel to ports and electric vehicles to win the global race for Britain. *[Interruption.]* Yes, and nuclear power, too. This may be the fifth energy relaunch in two and a half years, but it is more of the same from this Government. They can relaunch their policies as many times as they like, but they fail and fail again.

Graham Stuart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his response, but Members on the Government Benches will have been listening with a certain degree of incredulity, because we remember that in 2010 he left the people of this country in the worst housing stock in Europe. They were cold, their bills were unmanageable and just 14% of houses were properly insulated. Now it is half, and we need to go further and faster, which is why we have the energy efficiency taskforce. It is why we have announced £6.5 billion in this Parliament, and it is why we are announcing today our new initiative on insulation. It is why there is another £6 billion to be spent between 2025 and 2028. The Labour party failed absolutely on the most basic thing: looking after people in their homes so they could pay their bills.

That is not all, however, because on renewables the Labour party now talks about this transformation by 2030, which no one other than the Labour party—it is not involved, I fear, in an entirely open, transparent, and possibly even honest exercise—believes can be delivered by 2030. What was Labour's record on power? In 2010, 7% of our electricity came from renewables. If Labour in government had unleashed renewables the way we did, families this last winter would not have needed the

Government to step in, because we would not have been so reliant on gas. It was Labour's failure. It was 7% of electricity then, but it is nearly half today. This Government have transformed our performance, while the Labour party failed in power.

What are Labour's ideas going forward? What do they consist of? While we have unlocked £200 billion of investment since we came into power, the Labour party, led by the hard left, with whom the right hon. Gentleman has always had more than a passing association, want through its GB Energy to nationalise an industry in which we have brought in global investment. Instead of unlocking renewables, Labour will, if it gets back into power, do exactly what it did in power last time: fail to deliver renewables, reverse the green transformation, fail to meet our carbon budget targets and let down Britain and every family, who will be back in cold, freezing homes with overly expensive bills to boot. That is what the Labour party offers.

We are internationally competitive. It is great that other countries, such as America with the Inflation Reduction Act, are seeking to catch up with us on things such as offshore wind. We support that. On onshore wind, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, as I have said, we are committed to reviewing it and ensuring that we can take it forward in a way that runs with the support and consent of local people.

In response to what the right hon. Gentleman said at the end of his words, three quarters of the power of this country today comes from fossil fuels, and we are the most decarbonised country in the G7. The right hon. Gentleman, the Labour party and the Scottish National party do not have a plan to stop using fossil fuels. What they have a plan for—this is unbelievable—is to make sure that we do not produce our own, that we import energy from abroad at the cost of billions and billions, that we make ourselves less energy secure, that we lose the 120,000 jobs, most of which are in Scotland, in the oil and gas industry and that we lose their capability to help deliver the hydrogen and carbon capture and storage industries upon which our decarbonisation path depends. The Labour party failed when it was in power. Its analysis of what it needs to do now is failing, too, and the British people will not be fooled.

Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): May I thank the Minister for his kind words about the net zero review, and indeed the Government's full response so soon after the review was submitted? I hope that the UK's net zero pathway is now in a better place as a result of the recommendations. I should say that they are not my recommendations, but those of all the sectors I went to speak to and thousands of individuals, businesses and companies that want to get on with delivering decarbonisation, because they see the economic opportunity for the UK.

Does the Minister agree that we now need to slay this myth that somehow net zero will make us colder and poorer? Net zero will make us warmer and richer, and it is the economic opportunity of the decade, if not this century, to create a new economy, just as other countries such as the United States have recognised. Will he also accept that rather than talk down what the US has done, we need to work with our allies and democratic partners in creating a new special relationship around green energy?

Lastly, just to reflect on the comments made by the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), net zero is not just about 2050. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road. We do not have 28 years; we have seven years to deliver on the most ambitious nationally determined contribution of a 68% emissions reduction. If the UK achieves that, it is an economic prize that every single country across the world will look to us on how to achieve, and it will deliver further growth. There are economic consequences to not meeting that 2030 target, just as there will be severe economic consequences to not delivering net zero. I hope the Minister will urge both this party and any other climate delayers, who become the new deniers, that ultimately net zero is the future for the UK.

Graham Stuart: I thank my right hon. Friend and again pay tribute to him for all his work. This is the economic opportunity. If we look at a map of Europe, we can see the opportunity around the British Isles, and we will capture that energy. We are also blessed with around a third of all carbon storage in Europe. We can operationalise that to decarbonise the UK and provide a service to Europe, and we will do so. It will lead to the reindustrialisation of the north-west, north-east, Wales and Scotland. The opportunities are immense, and colleagues have been fighting hard.

On the NDC, we have set that ambitious world-leading 2030 target, and we are committed to delivering our commitments, including the 2030 NDC. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Doncaster North is a little out of touch. Countries are not due to start reporting to the United Nations framework convention on climate change on progress towards meeting NDCs until 2024, but we have quantified proposals and policies already to cover 92%, and we will go further. Just as we have done with our carbon budgets, we will exceed, not fall short. It was the Labour party that fell short on insulation and renewables; this party has a record of delivery, and our policies are supplemented by others that we have not quantified yet as we work hard to roll out these things. We will meet that 2030 target. We will continue our leadership role as arguably the only major economy in the world that is on that net zero pathway to 2050.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I think the greenest aspect of these announcements is the level of recycling in them without the actual funding to back them up. Starting with nuclear, there is no successful European pressurised water reactor project anywhere in the world. Hinkley has almost doubled in price to £33 billion, so we know that Sizewell C will cost something like £35 billion. That is a huge, scandalous waste of money that could be better utilised elsewhere. On SMRs, there is not even an approved design with the regulator yet. At £2 billion a pop, SMRs are not cheap either, and it is a myth that they will lower energy bills and provide security. Nuclear is the only energy technology to get more expensive rather than cheaper over the years.

We need more storage. I keep asking about pumped storage hydro. Please will the Government agree a carbon floor mechanism so that SSE can get on with Coire Glas and Drax can get on with the Cruachan extension? While the United States has the Inflation Reduction

[Alan Brown]

Act, when we look at the budget for allocation round 5, funding has been cut by a third from £285 million to £205 million, while we have inflationary pressures of 30%. The reality is that it will not deliver what we need it to deliver. Has the Minister looked at the lessons from the Spanish auction, which failed miserably and did not deliver on allocations?

The Minister knows that we need a greater ringfenced pot for tidal. At the moment, tidal stream energy has a 80% to 90% UK supply chain. If the Government do not increase the ringfenced budget, we risk offshoring manufacturing again. If he is talking about being powered by Britain, he needs to increase that funding for tidal stream so that we are building the UK supply chain.

On CCS, Acorn was not even mentioned in the statement. It was promised to us in 2014, and now it is not even mentioned. Is there going to be a definitive funding allocation for Acorn and are there going to be timescales for that funding, or is it a further betrayal when the Government are taking in £60-odd billion in additional oil and gas revenues? The reality is clear: Scotland has the energy, but Westminster keeps the powers.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman's party of course opposes nuclear, despite the opportunity it provides to this country, and it means that Scotland does not benefit as it should. He talked about pumped hydro, and I would be happy to meet him to discuss that further.

We are the world leader in tidal energy, although we would be hard pushed to understand that from the hon. Gentleman. We have put a ringfenced number on that, and budgets can be changed. The budgets were set on the basis of those projects that were ready and were coming forward. As that changes through this year, as I very much hope it will, we have the flexibility to change those budgets upwards appropriately. Like him, I believe that tidal has a great future, and I love the fact that we are the global leader. There are many jobs in Scotland and around the rest of the country from it.

On carbon capture and storage, this is a major announcement today. I am delighted about the eight projects for carbon capture that have come forward as part of track 1. Today, we have launched track 2, and we have said in the papers, as the hon. Gentleman will be delighted to hear, that we think the Scottish cluster—and Acorn—and Viking in the Humber are the two best placed at the moment to go ahead, although there will be a competition and we are opening that now. We will be having an extension of track 1, we will be having track 2 and we are cracking on with it. I very much look forward to seeing what the Scottish cluster has to offer, because I know it is particularly well prepared, and that is why it was not a reserve, but the reserve in our track 1 process.

Sir Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for calling me. Could I start by saying that I welcome the announcements that have been made? I think this does move us forward on the road to decarbonising our economy. I want to thank the Minister and particularly his officials for all of the work that has gone into this and the thousands of pages that have now been published. He made a really important point when he talked about how

"investment will be key to our success".

I could not agree more. I agree with him that, over the last 10 or 12 years, we have managed to attract tens of billions of pounds of private sector investment, but we have to deal with the world as we find it now. The reality is that the US, the EU and other nations are speeding up and attracting billions and billions of private sector investment right now. Why are we waiting until the autumn to respond to that? Do we not need to speed up and respond now to the Inflation Reduction Act and measures by other nations?

Graham Stuart: I thank my right hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to him for his role as COP President and all the leadership he has given in this area. He is absolutely right to highlight the investment competition, but as I think *The Economist* mentioned last week, the US approach, with its direct subsidy regime, is not as effective—not as cost-effective—as the UK regime. I am confident in our system, and we are rolling this forward. We have attracted £50 billion of green investment from 2021 to 2022. *[Interruption.]* Since 2010—when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North, who does not stop chuntering, left power, fortunately—we have had 50% more expenditure per share of GDP in this country than in the US, and we are opening up today the policies to ensure that that continues. My right hon. Friend will be delighted to learn that the CBI has said:

"The package of measures announced by the government represents a gear shift to boost energy security, reduce household bills and re-establish the UK's credentials as a leader in green technologies."

That is the CBI speaking for British business, and I believe that the policies today will deliver implementation, which is our main aim as we go forward.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): After more than eight years championing carbon capture and storage, I welcome today's positive news, even the repeated bits, but particularly the projects for Teesside. That said, the Government's ambition falls short of the industry's, and the Department's website shows that projects for CF Fertilisers, Alfanar and Kellas Midstream have not made it. Why is that, and what impact will the decision to ditch the Humber projects, in the Minister's own backyard, have on the innovative, collaborative and excellent Humber-Tees carbon capture, utilisation and storage project?

Graham Stuart: I think there was some recognition of good news in there from the hon. Gentleman. He and, unfortunately, all the Labour MPs in his area seem endlessly to talk down Teesside, as it goes from success to success under its excellent Mayor. Today is fantastic news for Teesside, and as I have said, this is just the beginning. We are starting projects now, we are accelerating track 2 and we are promising an extension this year to track 1. We are doing it. The hon. Gentleman, of whom I am a friend and admirer, should stop talking down the success of his area, get behind the development and look at how we have moved from the dire situation in 2010 to the world leadership position we hold today.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): There is much to be welcomed in the Minister's statement, but excluding Drax from the track 1 CCS projects will come as a surprise to many and a blow to the company's employees in my constituency and the wider region.

I do not think there are any projects in the Humber region that have got through on track 1. The management at Drax will now have to urgently consider what to do with their UK operations, especially when we consider the challenging economics of biomass operations post March 2027. Could the Minister clear something up for me? *The Yorkshire Post* reported last August that the Prime Minister backed Drax's BECCS—bioenergy with carbon capture and storage—plans. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that *The Yorkshire Post* reporting was accurate, and if so, why has the Government's position now changed?

Graham Stuart: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, and for being such an active campaigner for Drax and probably the foremost champion of power BECCS in this place. He is absolutely right that power BECCS and Drax are critically important to this country and the future of our net zero strategy. There are no power BECCS projects going ahead in the first phase of the track 1 process due to infrastructure constraints. We remain committed to our ambitious CCUS targets, which include 5 million tonnes of greenhouse gas removals by 2030, and power BECCS has a key role to play in that. That is why we have put so much emphasis on track 1 expansion and track 2, both of which will get further CCUS projects operationalised by 2030. To respond to the specific point my right hon. Friend made, the Department totally understands that we need to work with Drax on a bridging option between 2027 and 2030, and the Secretary of State has charged our officials with working with Drax on what those options look like.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Just a week ago, the UN Secretary-General said we needed a "quantum leap" when it comes to climate action. This Government have laboured and, frankly, brought forth a mouse. There is no new funding, no street-by-street home insulation plan, no mandatory rooftop solar and no unblocking of onshore wind. Instead, Ministers are gambling with technologies that are slow and costly at best, and unproven at worst. While some CCS might have a role for carbon-intensive industry, will the Minister accept that—given its very high cost, high life-cycle emissions and appalling record of delivery, and since it cannot achieve energy security because fossil fuels will simply be sold on global markets at global prices—CCS cannot be used as an excuse for licensing new oil and gas in the middle of a climate emergency?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. *[Interruption.]* I think I was disappearing like a mouse underneath the Dispatch Box there. We of course made major announcements in the Budget. What today is all about is giving the detail of how we are going to unlock that. She raises the question of carbon capture and storage. There is not a way for us to get to net zero without using carbon capture and storage. I remember that it was said by the Labour Government in 2003, if I recall correctly, that it was urgent. Here we are, 20 years later, but I am delighted to say—*[Interruption.]* I am delighted to say that, having had to come into government with nobody insulated and practically no renewables, and a note on a piece of paper saying there was no money left, we are coming forward with proposals to put that right.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I had the great pleasure of opening the Siemens wind turbine blade factory in Hull, very close to my right hon. Friend's constituency, which is living proof that net zero, low-cost energy, energy security and jobs and prosperity can go hand in hand. Does my right hon. Friend recognise the export opportunities for the next generation of offshore wind—floating offshore wind—working with countries including Japan? On nuclear, will he consider accelerating the national planning statement so that developers of small modular reactors do not have to wait until 2025 to plan deployment? And on hydrogen, will the road map include a target date for phasing out polluting grey hydrogen, as recommended in a recent Science and Technology Committee report?

Graham Stuart: I share my right hon. Friend's enthusiasm for the export opportunities that lie ahead of us. By leaning in ahead of others, as we have done and are doing, we can develop technologies and solutions which can then be exported all around the world, to the good of those other countries and ourselves. It is great to see us brokering support for just energy transition partnerships with the likes of Indonesia and Vietnam, who are great partners for us going forward. We are setting out today our vision for hydrogen and our commissioning of electrolytic hydrogen projects as part of our effort to transform the situation and move to a position where we have no unabated hydrogen as soon as that can possibly be delivered.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I am not sure what the Minister had for breakfast but it is probably best avoided because his aggressive and belligerent approach has undermined much of the good cross-party consensus that there is on this important issue. No one can look at the home insulation schemes of the last decade and imagine they are anything other than a painful failure, so for cities such as mine that have historical housing and need an insulation scheme, how will the new schemes be different from the failures of the last few years?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman talked about getting the tone right; perhaps I responded in the appropriate tone to the way that the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) addressed me. When I consider that he was a Minister in the Government who so spectacularly failed, it is all the more likely that I might be a little spikey. *[Interruption.]* If he stops barracking for a moment, I will respond to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who asked about insulation over the last 10 or so years: we have gone from 14% of homes effectively insulated to half of all homes, and we have set up the energy efficiency taskforce. We are driving forward and putting a budget in place precisely to take this forward and improve it further. With our support for heat pumps, we are looking to green our houses and lower costs for families, as well as meeting the climate challenge, on which the last Government singularly failed and I am pleased to say that this Government are making progress.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Who will pay for CCS as it does not generate any direct revenue from retail customers?

Graham Stuart: To decarbonise industry, we will need CCS and hydrogen. We are socialising the funding requirements across the piece to ensure that we deliver

[Graham Stuart]

what is necessary to meet our carbon targets, at the lowest possible cost to consumers. This year we are also consulting on measures to prevent carbon leakage, ensure that we do not drive UK industry abroad, which I know my right hon. Friend is concerned about, and instead maintain our competitiveness as we move towards net zero.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): If the Government were so serious about climate action why did they need to be dragged into court and told by the High Court that their existing plans are not sufficient? Now we have a new strategy, but there is not very much new in it and still a de facto ban on onshore wind. Will the Minister commit to cancel the planned expansion of fossil fuel subsidies and instead commit to a significant increase in onshore wind?

Graham Stuart: I am afraid the hon. Lady may want to correct the record because she misled the House. The courts did not say our policies were insufficient; they said they wished to have more detail on them. We are responding to that technical point today, providing further detail. *[Interruption.]* Absolutely, it was not a reflection on the quality of those policies. We have met all our carbon budgets to date and have set out today the way we will meet our carbon budget 6, and, even though it is far ahead, we have already set out policies to cover 97% of it. As I have also said, we are looking to make sure that we come forward with more opportunities for onshore wind, but with the consent of local communities.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and strongly welcome the Government's commitment to a new generation of nuclear power stations, which are going to play an essential part in delivering both energy security and net zero. Can he confirm that, while a new Chinese-designed reactor may no longer be in prospect, Bradwell-on-Sea in my constituency remains a designated site for new nuclear investment?

Graham Stuart: The current nuclear policy statement identified Bradwell as a site for nuclear electricity, as my right hon. Friend rightly says, until the end of 2025. That statement continues to have effect for any nuclear infrastructure deployable before the end of that year, and of course with the launch today of Great British Nuclear, its first job is to look at the process for down-selecting technologies for small modular reactors, but it will also be involved in a renewed siting policy that will look at both gigawatt and SMR-scale nuclear projects.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Minister talks up energy security but fails to prioritise onshore wind, the best value renewable energy. By when will the Government remove the ban on onshore wind?

Graham Stuart: I have set out our position on onshore wind. The great thing about the CfD system we have set up is that it has helped to reveal costs. Ground-mounted solar might actually prove to be the lowest cost generator, but thanks to the system this Government have set up, we have competition between the various types of energy, and we are continuing with that. Having led the world on offshore wind and transformed the parlous situation we inherited, with just 7% of electricity coming from renewables in 2010, I am delighted to say that wind, both onshore and offshore, has a brilliant future under this Conservative Government.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am sure the Minister will have read reports this morning that his Department intends to bring forward a code that will initially be voluntary but will then become mandatory saying that mortgage lenders should ensure that their loan book only includes properties that have an energy performance certificate of C or above. Does the Minister accept that for those who live in an older property, a doer-upper, a national park or a listed property, the net effect of this policy is that they will have zero chance of a mortgage?

Graham Stuart: No policy decision has been made in this area. We have consulted and gone out and found ideas about the best way of doing this. My right hon. Friend is right to identify that any system needs to take account of the particularities of certain property types, and we will ensure we do that so that we both align with net zero and align with the reality of existing properties.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I am pleased the statement mentioned the importance of energy efficiency schemes, both for their contribution to our net zero ambitions and the help they can offer households. The New Economics Foundation estimates that had all homes across England and Wales been upgraded to EPC rating C over the past decade, energy bills would on average have been £530 cheaper per household. I take it that the £1 billion allocated for the great British insulation scheme is in addition to the £6 billion committed at the autumn statement for expenditure post-2025. Is the Minister considering ways of bringing forward some of this spending so that even greater progress can be made?

Graham Stuart: We would be in a very different and much better situation if, instead of inheriting such a tiny—derisory—number of properly insulated homes when we came into power, we had had the 50% we are at today. With the energy efficiency taskforce and my colleague Lord Callanan, we are bringing industry and other stakeholders together, working with the Welsh Government and others to make sure that we have all the right policies, because the best form of energy is energy we do not use: it is demand that we can remove and destroy. That is the cheapest, and it can help us be a lean and efficient economy, and with fewer people in fuel poverty.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Anglesey is known as energy island. We have wind, wave, solar, tidal, hydrogen and, hopefully, new nuclear at Wylfa, and we have projects like Morlais, Minesto, bp Mona, the Holyhead hydrogen hub and Lightsource bp, so I welcome the statement to power up Britain. Will the Minister confirm to me and my Ynys Môn constituents, particularly those in Cemlyn, Cemaes and Amlwch, that the UK Government are committed to new nuclear at Wylfa, and will he accept my invitation to visit Wylfa, one of the best new nuclear sites in the UK?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend will understand that I cannot make policy commitments to Wylfa on the hoof. What I can tell her is that it has already been assessed as one of the best nuclear sites in the UK and that if the energy focus, determination and sheer drive of the Member of Parliament has anything to do with it, Wylfa has a very positive and strong nuclear future ahead of it. I look forward to working with her. I am sure that if he has not visited already, the new Minister for Nuclear and Networks—the first time this country has ever had a Minister with "nuclear" in their title—the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), will visit her in her constituency.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The way to deliver energy security, tackle the climate crisis and lower bills as quickly as possible is through renewables, yet the Government are hooked on ever more oil and gas production, and on handing massive subsidies to polluting companies. Over 700 scientists have written to the Prime Minister to ask him to grant no new oil and gas licences, a call backed by the United Nations Secretary-General. Is it not time that the Minister used his powers to prevent the development of the Rosebank oilfield?

Graham Stuart: We are accelerating renewables as quickly as we possibly can. As I say, we have transformed the dire situation we inherited and we are moving as fast as we can on that, but we are going to need, and be dependent on, oil and gas for decades to come. Under net zero, we will still be using a quarter of the gas we use today. The hon. Gentleman is saying to his constituents, "Let's pay billions to foreign, sometimes hostile, states, rather than producing our own." That is economic madness. The gas we bring in on tankers has two and a half times the emissions of our domestically produced gas. On what planet would any rational and reasonable constituency MP want to propose that, unless they had some strange affinity with somewhere like Russia?

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Minister is exactly right that we are on the cusp of a new industrial revolution. Floating offshore wind will be a key part of that picture, so I welcome the confirmation he has given today of the £160 million FLOMIS—floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme—port infrastructure package. Will he confirm when he is likely to start awarding that funding? Does he agree with me that it needs to be used in a really targeted way to unlock private sector investment and ensure we capture first mover advantage with floating offshore wind? Will he visit the port of Milford Haven to see the really exciting things happening in the energy sector there?

Graham Stuart: I thank my right hon. Friend who, like my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), is relentless in promoting and pursuing these interests. He can see that moving towards net zero and capitalising on the huge natural assets around Wales, can contribute to jobs, prosperity and industrial renaissance, as well as help us to deliver the transition. I would be delighted to visit him. In answer to his earlier question, we want to do that as soon as possible. We announced the opening of it today. We want to move forward. We have to accelerate everything we can do right across the piece.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): RenewableUK commented that the budget and parameters set for the most recent contract for difference auction are currently too low and too tight to unlock all the potential investment in wind, solar and tidal stream. Tidal alone could produce huge amounts—up to 11 GW—of reliable clean electricity for far less than the cost of nuclear. The Minister claims he supports tidal, so why have the Government cut their funding commitments to it?

Graham Stuart: We have not cut our funding commitments; we have moved to a one-year allocation. The budgets are set based on our assessment of projects and where they are in the planning and permissions process. Those budgets, if projects can come forward and put themselves in a different position, can be altered by Ministers. I think we are in a fantastic position. We are the world leader and we have put in a ring-fenced pot specifically for tidal, so I suggest to the hon. Lady and her constituents that they should be celebrating Government support for tidal. We are the world leader, we are going further and our support continues. I look forward to visiting Scotland, and indeed Orkney, next week with a view to learning more about tidal potential, an enthusiasm for which I share with her.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend not just on his statement, but on his long-standing passion for this subject. Perhaps he can expand on something he referenced a moment ago: the fact that liquid gas imported in tankers creates two and a half times as many emissions as domestically produced gas in the North sea. Does he not agree with me that it is incomprehensible that the SNP and now Labour oppose domestic production, which is not only bad for jobs, but bad for the environment?

Graham Stuart: My right hon. Friend is, of course, absolutely right. The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) talked about growing our oil and gas. We are net importers of oil and gas, and production in the mature basin of the North sea is falling. Only new investment can unlock the greening and electrification of production, with even lower emissions in sight from the North sea than from tankered gas coming in from abroad. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we did as the leader of the Labour party, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said at Davos and had no new oil and gas licences, we would not stop using gas; we would just import more of it from abroad with higher emissions attached, with no jobs, no tax and no long-term benefit to the United Kingdom. That is not a tenable policy. I hope that, apart from their far-left colleagues on the far Labour Back Benches, everyone else in the Labour party recognises that is a crazy position and it needs to change.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I take the Minister's recent comments to be a notification that I will be having a constituency visit from him. I look forward to that.

However, can I take him back to the question of energy security and just remind him that there is more to energy security than what we produce and where? It is also about the protection of infrastructure and the

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

assets around it. All this week, we have had a Russian tug, the Nikolay Chiker, steaming up and down to the east of Shetland in the vicinity of the pipeline servicing Brent and Ninian. This morning, the tug has gone around to the north-west of Shetland and is now doing the same thing in the vicinity of the pipeline servicing the Laggan field to the west of Shetland. It is a merchant vessel, but we know that the Russian military often purpose merchant vessels in this way. Will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to see, first, if they know what is going on? Secondly, if they do not, will they find out? Thirdly, what will we be doing in the long term to protect these vital national assets?

Graham Stuart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Perhaps we can follow up offline on that. As appropriate, I would certainly be happy to engage with my colleagues in the MOD. As a Minister for energy security, I keep all that under advisement. We will formally notify him of my intention to come to his constituency and, whether next week or another time, we can discuss this matter further and make sure I can reassure him on what are very well expressed concerns.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I love the energy the Government are putting behind energy, particularly nuclear. I hope that Berkeley and Oldbury will get a small modular reactor, because the western gateway is working really hard. Supersmart Stroud businesses are still coming up against things like planning barriers for solar rooftop and tracking, and Competition and Markets Authority problems for financing options for renewables. The UK also needs to look really lively to win the race on the hydrogen ICE—internal combustion engine. I welcome the big announcements today, but will the Government move the machine to resolve a raft of smaller daily frustrations, so we can unleash some amazing British businesses, many of which are in the Stroud district?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If there was one priority above all else in the Department, it would be ensuring that we get the grid sorted and the infrastructure in place to allow that transformation. We will publish an action plan this year in response to the Electricity Networks Commissioner Nick Winser's recommendations, when he reports in June on halving the development time for transmission network projects. However, across the piece, we need to speed up connections, and sort out the queue and perverse incentives in that system. We have a lot to do and we are working at it. Only last week in No. 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister hosted an event looking at the networks piece. The offshore wind acceleration taskforce had its final meeting this week, which looked at grids, among other things.

I thank the offshore wind champion Tim Pick for all his work, as well as Nick Winser. I also take the opportunity to thank officials in the new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, who have put a huge amount of work into producing all these policies and are working hard to ensure that implementation can follow as fast as possible. Officials in my new Department have absolutely shone and I look forward to taking forward our work with their help.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Too many homes in places such as Chopwell in my constituency urgently need insulation and energy efficiency. They, and people across the country, face additional charges of up to £1,000. How will the Government take active steps to address issues such as those in Chopwell, to ensure that they are energy efficient and that people can benefit from better homes?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the issue. That is why we have set up the energy efficiency taskforce. We are putting in £6.5 billion in this Parliament, as well as announcing the major insulation scheme today. We have another £6 billion between 2025 and 2028. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that homes are insulated. I am pleased that today's announcements will see 300,000 of the most energy-inefficient homes in the country tackled, reducing families' bills by hundreds of pounds a year as a result.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): With energy security a key strategic imperative for our Union, I thank the Minister not only for this statement but for his common-sense approach to investments in oil and gas as we transition to a greener economy. Building on other Members' comments about investment in British nuclear, such projects are notoriously slow at being delivered. Can we look at how to very quickly get spades in the ground and invest in small nuclear reactors for the benefit of the country?

Graham Stuart: The reason for setting up Great British Nuclear is precisely to de-risk, roll the pitch and accelerate technologies. One of the benefits of small modular reactors as opposed to gigawatt scale is quicker replicability. The hope is that it can move to a factory-like process, eliminate errors iteratively and then deliver nuclear energy safely, cheaply and more quickly than previous technologies have allowed.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): In relation to the Acorn project, I get a feeling of déjà vu. It was promised in 2008 and ahead of the 2014 referendum, which to some of us feels like a generation ago. Can the Minister do something that none of his predecessors has ever been able to do: tell us exactly the difference between a track 1 reserve project and a track 2 project? Can he tell us what difference that will make to the timescale for funding and delivery, should the Acorn project finally be favoured by his colleagues?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is a little unfair. If one of the two selected track 1 projects were to come off track, the reserve would move up—that was the point. It was an indicator of the maturity and viability of the Scottish cluster. We are moving fast. We have announced the launch of track 2 now. We believe that the Scottish cluster and the Viking cluster in the Humber are the two leading contenders best placed to do it, and we will move forward with speed. I look forward to working with him and colleagues to make sure that the Scottish cluster can play a full part in our future.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for today's announcements and for his ongoing engagement on the new Department's work. Will he reaffirm his commitment to rapid delivery of

floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, along with the vital UK-based supply chain and port infrastructure right around the Celtic sea coast?

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is a member of a small, elite group of colleagues who are relentlessly focused on ensuring that the energy transition is done in the right way, leading to jobs and prosperity for her constituents and others. I can confirm that. Having announced the launch of FLOWMIS today, we look forward rapidly to supporting the port infrastructure that is critical to the delivery of floating offshore wind, and the maintenance of the UK as the world leader on this vital technology. Estimates show that only about 8% of potential offshore wind capacity globally is on a fixed bed. For those who have a shallow continental shelf like us, 92% is floating. There is enormous opportunity for the UK if we unlock the infrastructure and the jobs, because then we can export that capability all around the world.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): The Minister spoke of making policy on the hoof, so I wonder why the Government's policy seems to be chasing a unicorn. What happens if the unicorn of carbon capture and storage turns out to be a donkey with an ice cream on its head? Would it not be better to unlock the stables of the reliable horses of home insulation, solar and onshore wind?

Graham Stuart: So can I take it that the hon. Lady's party is opposed? It failed to support the regulated asset base regulations in Committee to allow new nuclear to go ahead, despite its protestations to the contrary. Now, she seems to be opposed to carbon capture and storage, which offers enormous opportunities for all sorts of industrial parts of the United Kingdom—another failure. On solar, I am delighted to announce the launch of a solar taskforce precisely to accelerate the take-up.

I cannot believe the gall of the Opposition party, which left Government with just 11% of our electricity from renewables, when it is around half now. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) failed in government, and now he chunters from a sedentary position. We will drive forward the solar taskforce. Having transformed our solar base, which is greater than that of France—despite the larger area—and about equivalent to the radiated country of Spain, we will increase it fivefold by 2035. That is why we have the taskforce—because we deliver. We do not just talk or chunter from a sedentary position. We transform the UK's energy system.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): If we are truly serious about speeding up the planning process for energy production, the Minister's new Department needs exclusive planning control over all matters. Is that Government policy? If it is, when is it likely to happen?

Graham Stuart: Talking of making policy on the hoof, my announcement today that the Department would take over the entirety of the planning system would cause something of a Whitehall ruckus. At least twice this week I have met colleagues from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure a joined-up approach across Government. That Department is alive to these issues, as is the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my Department and the Ministry of Defence, which has equities here. Joining up and working across Government so that this is as seamless as possible—it is never entirely seamless—is at the heart of delivering the changes in the system that we need. My hon. Friend is right that planning is vital to that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. I have listened attentively to him, I have read the Government publication and, unfortunately, I did not see any reference to tidal energy. In Strangford lough we have a ready-made project. I was pleased to have the Minister over to visit the Queens University biology station. The scientists there were very happy to see him there and to have his input on the projects that we feel can make a difference. Will he outline whether the potential of tidal energy is getting the appropriate attention it deserves?

Graham Stuart: It was my great pleasure to be hosted by the hon. Gentleman at Strangford lough and to hear all about the potential strengths of the tides. I am delighted to see the growth of tidal energy. For offshore wind, it took quite a while to build up what was a nascent market. People said that we would never be able to lower costs offshore, yet we did. I think that tidal is on that pathway. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the ringfence, our continued support and our flexibility on budget as and when projects come through. We seek to drive the cost curves down so that, ultimately, we are technology neutral but support and nurse new technologies such as that, which have great potential.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): There is much to welcome in my right hon. Friend's statement, particularly in the Humber region, as he will recognise. He referenced a £160 million fund for port infrastructure. Clearly, improvements will be needed to cope with many of these projects. Can he indicate when that is likely to come forward? I presume there will be a bidding process. Will that be open fairly soon?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Let me follow up with him to talk about more of the details, but I welcome, as he does, the success of the Gigastack Phillips 66 project, the initial hydrogen project. We are leading the world and, having met with Phillips 66, I know that that type of refinery of the future has a real opportunity to play an important part in delivering the green transition on a number of fronts. It is fantastic to see it successful in today's announcements.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. This strategy rightly focuses on security of energy, its cost and decarbonisation. I would be grateful if he could confirm that the Government will also concentrate on the enormous opportunity to create jobs, and that they will come forward quickly with both a skills strategy and a plan for investment in infrastructure, which should include both the grid and ports such as Lowestoft?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for his constructive contribution, as ever. I co-chair the green jobs delivery group. We are working closely with industry to ensure that we get the signals from them across multiple trades, and engaging with the Department for

[Graham Stuart]

Education to ensure that it can use those inputs to construct various courses to support that. We are absolutely focused. The reason we have a Minister for nuclear and networks is that we recognise that we have to get that infrastructure right. If we get it right—look at the success we have already had and at our investability going forward—it will be a tremendous transition, generating lower-cost energy and making us one of the most competitive economies in the world.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for his statement and for responding to questions for over an hour. Could he stay in his place a little longer, as this point of order relates to him?

Wera Hobhouse: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has accused me of misleading the House and asked me to correct the record. I am happy to do that. My question should read: "If the Government were serious about climate action, why did the Government need to be dragged into court and told by the High Court that their existing policies are lacking detail?" I apologise to the House that I used the word "insufficient" rather than "lacking detail."

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister wish to respond?

Graham Stuart: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Court asked for more detail and I am delighted to say that is precisely what we have provided today. There was no suggestion from the Court that our policies were not adequate. It wished for more detail and we have been delighted to share that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That stands on the record from both sides.

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: 25th Anniversary

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 23 January, 7 February, and 1, 16 and 21 March 2023, on the effectiveness of the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, HC 781.]

1.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 25th anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

It gives me great pleasure to open today's debate on the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. This is an historic occasion, not just for the people of Northern Ireland, who have benefited directly from the peace, prosperity and host of other benefits the agreement has brought, but for the entire United Kingdom and for all of us in this House. I know that right hon. and hon. Members will have their own unique reflections on this momentous occasion.

The agreement ended almost 30 years of armed conflict in Northern Ireland. That will always remain its most profound and important legacy. The generation that has grown up since its signing has only known relative peace and increasing reconciliation. That in itself is a remarkable achievement.

As many of us know, the agreement comprises three closely interrelated strands, all of which underpin the peace and prosperity that Northern Ireland enjoys to this day. Strand 1 established the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, enabling decisions on health, education, employment and much more to be undertaken locally for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland. These institutions provide an important guarantee on inclusive decision making on governance, representative of all communities in Northern Ireland.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the most important elements under discussion is the role of education in creating the necessary conditions for having more united communities in the future?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, indeed. I think that is even more vital now that we have a generation of people across our United Kingdom who did not experience the troubles at first hand. It is very important that knowledge is transferred to them, so that they can learn from the mistakes of the past and rebuild the foundation and network the hon. Lady identifies.

Strand 2 of the agreement provided for co-operation between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and established the North South Ministerial Council. Strand 3 included the establishment of the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which are conduits for the important and enduring friendship and dialogue we enjoy with the Irish Government and with jurisdictions across these islands today. The Government are steadfastly committed to upholding each of the three strands, which balance the aspirations of all communities in Northern Ireland and remain vital elements in Northern Ireland's constitutional settlement.

The Belfast/Good Friday agreement is also based on guarantees of rights. It recognises the crucial birth right of all people of Northern Ireland to identify and be accepted as Irish, British or both, and confirms that the right to hold one or both citizenships is accepted. The Government delivered the powerful new institutions set up by the agreement to secure and protect the rights of the whole community. The agreement enshrines the principle of consent—an important principle that safeguards Northern Ireland's place in the Union and means that Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom for as long as the majority of its people want it to be.

We must credit the agreement with helping to set Northern Ireland on a path to permanently ending armed conflict. That achievement was delivered with the support of many other countries, including the United States, Finland, South Africa and Canada.

One of the most important and most tangible aspects of the agreement was the return to devolved Government in Northern Ireland after nearly 30 years. There has been a long history of devolved decision making in Northern Ireland since its foundation 101 years ago. The agreement recognised that previous devolved Governments had not been inclusive of the whole community, and the agreement established important guarantees and principles setting out that a devolved Government should work for all parts of the community in Northern Ireland.

With a functioning Executive, Northern Ireland enjoys the best of all worlds—a strong Northern Ireland Assembly and a strong United Kingdom Government. Regardless of which part of the community people are from, the importance of locally accountable decision making in the interests of Northern Ireland is something that everyone should be able to agree with.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way in what is a significant debate to all of us, marking an important milestone for peace in Northern Ireland. Does he agree with me that we need to be very careful that we do not take that peace for granted? We have seen the threat level increase recently and increased tension. It is as incumbent on all of us now as it was 25 years ago to do whatever we can to protect what is an ongoing process in the peace agreement.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Lady utters very wise words. It falls on all our shoulders and on those of all politicians across the United Kingdom, especially in Northern Ireland, to continue to build on the peace process and the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and what it stands for today, and to do so deep into the future, because it is so important. As we have seen this week, with the rise in the threat level of Northern Ireland-related terrorism in Northern Ireland, we cannot take anything for granted.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The Secretary of State rightly comments on the change in the security threat assessment; I note in particular the threat relating to dissident republicans. He will also be acutely aware of the rise of activity within loyalism, with a spate of attacks in recent days in my constituency and that of my colleague the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Will the Secretary of State tell us a little more about the Government's commitment to crack down on continuing loyalist activities and ensure that those people who are involved in illegality face the full rigours of the law?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes. This is probably not the appropriate time or space to do that, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that there has been an increase in loyalist paramilitarism. The Government are supporting the Police Service of Northern Ireland in clamping down on it; we are well aware of it, and are working with politicians across the piece in Northern Ireland. With the Police Service of Northern Ireland, there is a lot that we can do both to decrease tensions in those communities and to make sure that those who are using criminal activity at the expense of their neighbours in their communities face the appropriate penalties.

Let me return to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. For our part, the UK Government have continually supported and invested in Northern Ireland, its place in the Union and the Belfast/Good Friday agreement framework. We are committed to making it better still, as we have shown through the investment, support and commitment that we have provided as a UK Government to the Northern Ireland institutions through numerous successor agreements. Those agreements prove that the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement 25 years ago was not the end of a journey, but a new beginning. Each of them has helped to pave the way to the Northern Ireland that we see today, whether it be the progress on policing and justice at St Andrews that enabled those matters to be devolved in the Hillsborough Castle agreement; the substantial capital funding that we provided for new shared and integrated schools in Fresh Start and Stormont House; or the investment that we provided in public services in New Decade, New Approach.

It is precisely because of the UK Government's steadfast commitment both to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and to Northern Ireland's place in our Union that we have, through listening to and heeding the concerns among the people of Northern Ireland about the protocol, replaced it with the new Windsor framework, which makes fundamental amendments to it. The framework restores the delicate balance struck by the agreement and addresses problems with the protocol by removing the Irish sea border for UK goods, with a new green lane and UK internal market scheme for businesses trading from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, removing costs, paperwork and checks. Just as importantly, it gives the people of Northern Ireland a veto over new laws that apply there, in the form of the Stormont brake.

Northern Ireland has changed beyond recognition over the past 25 years, thanks to the peace and prosperity that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement has brought. Upon that foundation, Northern Ireland has built a dynamic and vibrant economy, as can be seen across the whole of the nation. Its world-leading screen and film production industry, which produced "Game of Thrones" and "The Northman" among others, has already contributed £1 billion to the Northern Irish economy. There is a fintech sector, a cyber-security sector and an engineering sector going from strength to strength in the Northern Ireland of today. Those sectors are creating thousands of highly skilled jobs, with Belfast now ranked as one of the top 25 tech cities in the world.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

In the years since the agreement was signed, Northern Ireland has also taken positive steps towards greater reconciliation. I pay tribute to the work of community organisations, faith groups and individuals, and to all who have tried to foster that reconciliation, respect and mutual understanding in Northern Ireland in the journey to the agreement and over the past 25 years.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): In the list that he is rightly setting out, will the Secretary of State recognise the particular contribution that very many women in Northern Ireland, across the communities, have made in leading the dialogue, repairing their communities and building relationships of trust?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I will. Further into my speech, I might well mention just one or two of the remarkable women who have done exactly as the Chairman of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs says.

The fact that Northern Ireland now has a locally accountable police force demonstrates the huge progress that Northern Ireland has made. However, events such as the abhorrent shooting of DCI John Caldwell illustrate a point that hon. Members have already raised in interventions: that the peace that Northern Ireland now enjoys and that we have all worked so hard for cannot and must not be taken for granted. Yesterday, I made the announcement that the Northern Ireland-related terrorism threat level has been increased by MI5 from substantial to severe. Coming ahead of the agreement's 25th anniversary, that news is particularly disappointing. However, it does not detract from the fact that Northern Ireland remains markedly more peaceful and reconciled than it was in 1998. That is a testament to the people of Northern Ireland, as well as to the PSNI and the security services that do so much to keep us all safe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I put on the record my thanks to the Secretary of State for what he says about the PSNI? In the past two weeks, my constituency and that of the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) have been subjected to a lot of violence, including attacks on houses, discrimination and the intimidation of people who have had to move out. It is only a matter of time before that level of violence spills over into injury or death. The PSNI are the people in the middle who are keeping us safe. Our special thanks should go to the officer in charge of our area, Superintendent Johnston McDowell, and to all his police officers, who are doing a grand job of policing to the best of their ability. We should all be supporting them, because they are the people who are filling the gap.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; I completely concur with his statement. We should also pay tribute to Chief Constable Simon Byrne, who has introduced community policing across Northern Ireland. Community policing is something that we are all used to in England, Scotland and Wales, but it is a different way of policing—a better way of policing—in Northern Ireland, and it is definitely helping across all communities. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's words and would add to them.

As we approach the agreement's anniversary, we must acknowledge that there is more to be done to realise other aspects of the agreement's ambition for a society that is reconciled with the past and able to look to the future. We must never let the progress that we have seen allow us to be complacent about the challenges of the future. We are investing in the development of integrated education so that more children can be educated together. We look forward, rather than back to a divided past.

It is also our duty to tell the agreement's story so that the next generation may appreciate Northern Ireland's remarkable journey and build a more prosperous future. That is why, as part of our programme to mark the anniversary, we have launched the first phase of a pioneering educational package. The package has been developed by the National Archives for parents and teachers across the United Kingdom to use in assemblies and the classroom, thereby enabling this vital story to be told.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution that Members across this House, Members of the other place and those elsewhere made to the journey to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement 25 years ago and have made to Northern Ireland. No single party, Government, individual or organisation owned the journey to that agreement or owns the journey of Northern Ireland since. From the famous speech by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, in November 1990 that announced that the United Kingdom had

"no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland",

to the 1993 Downing Street declaration between John Major and Albert Reynolds that provided a pathway to a negotiated settlement on the basis of the principle of consent, it is clear that the agreement was unlocked through the achievement, bravery and dedication of a great many people in politics, public life, religion, civil society and community over many, many years.

Last week I was privileged, along with other Members, to attend a reception at Speaker's House where I met three inspirational Members of the Youth Parliament in Northern Ireland: Izzy Fitzpatrick, Ryan Kearney and Lauren Bond. I think that all who heard Lauren will agree that she made a barnstorming speech. She spoke powerfully about her future in her nation and, notably, about the forgotten role of women in the peace process, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). I hope I can begin to put that right today.

From one of my predecessors as Northern Ireland Secretary, Mo Mowlam, who enabled the Tony Blair Government to secure the Belfast agreement in April 1998 through an unrelenting bravery, a disarming personal touch and an unstoppable belief in the potential of peace, to the Women's Coalition and people such as Monica McWilliams—a signatory to the multi-party agreement—women played a pioneering role, and rightly insisted that their voices be heard in the peace process. Pat Hume, a consummate diplomat, endured risks and threats to get people talking, and established warm relations with families of Unionist politicians, including Daphne Trimble, who later served in the two human rights bodies created by the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It is clear that the full story of the agreement cannot be told without acknowledging the contributions of those and other brave and visionary women.

As we approach the 25th anniversary of that agreement, I am also aware that we will do so without some of its other architects—not least Lord Trimble, the leader of the Ulster Unionist party and the first of Northern Ireland's First Ministers, and John Hume, the long-time advocate of civil rights through dialogue, campaigning and peaceful protest, alongside whom I had the pleasure of serving for five years in the European Parliament. They succeeded not just because they worked tirelessly, but because they took risks. In the face of opposition and, at times, threats, they pursued their vision of what they thought Northern Ireland could be. Northern Ireland is poorer without their leadership, but they serve as examples to generations of political leaders now and to come of what politics can do.

Others, too, took risks along the way to secure the gains of the past 25 years. The leadership of Sinn Féin, particularly Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, persuaded republicanism that its future lay in the ballot box, and in 2007 the late Reverend Ian Paisley—with whom, again, I served for five years in the European Parliament—led his party into power sharing. I note the contribution of Lord Alderdice—whose party provided a powerful voice for those who were not part of either of Northern Ireland's two traditions—to the securing of widespread engagement with the peace process; and, obviously, we recognise the role of the Progressive Unionist party, and particularly the late David Ervine, in providing clear representation for loyalism. I know that I have omitted many other names involved in the journey to the agreement, but I also know that the whole House, including the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), will join me today in recognising their collective achievement.

If this anniversary can remind us all of one thing, it should be that progress did not come easily. It took decades of tireless work, leadership and steadfast commitment. Most important, it required the willingness of people to work across divides, sometimes with others with whom it had hitherto been unimaginable to work. The lessons from the leaders of 1998 will, I hope, prove instructive for all of us who have the honour of following in their footsteps. I know that Northern Ireland is on a path to a better, brighter and more prosperous future over the coming 25 years, thanks to the foundation of peace and stability that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement provides.

We are creating a platform for that more prosperous future by investing in the people of Northern Ireland, giving them the skills that they need to succeed and harnessing their entrepreneurial spirit. Only last month the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) announced £18.9 million of funding to boost the fantastic cyber-security sector in Northern Ireland. Together with more than £600 million of UK Government investment in city and growth deals for every part of Northern Ireland, those funds will ensure that the Northern Ireland of the next 25 years will be a byword for the cutting-edge technology and innovation for which it is already becoming known. We have addressed the issues caused by the Northern Ireland protocol by agreeing the Windsor framework, which fundamentally amends the old protocol. It protects the economic rights of the people of Northern Ireland, and provides us with the basis to move forward together as one United Kingdom. We, as the UK Government, will continue to support and invest in Northern Ireland to make it an even better place in which to live, work and start a business in the years to come.

The 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement is an historic moment for Northern Ireland, for the whole United Kingdom, and for Ireland. It is a milestone that will be heralded in this country, and in the countries whose contribution to the peace process made the agreement's success possible. Today's debate affords us all an opportunity to recognise this remarkable achievement, and to reaffirm our commitment to protecting and upholding the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and supporting Northern Ireland's journey in the 25 years to come in order to build a more perfect peace. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

2.6 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Secretary of State, who made a thoughtful, considered and important speech from which we can all benefit. Let me also thank him for putting forward the debate in Government time: that is much appreciated by Members throughout the House.

Issues that affect Northern Ireland are often bipartisan, and I think the spirit of today's debate should reflect that approach. Tony Blair, for example, was always keen—and still is—to stress the extraordinary work done by John Major before him to provide a platform for the peace process that was to follow. This debate should allow us time to recognise them, and the other giants who worked on the agreement. There are many lessons we can learn from them today.

Twenty-five years is a very significant milestone. An entire generation has grown up since the people of Northern Ireland chose an end to violence. The Secretary of State referred to the event in Speaker's House attended by representatives of the Youth Parliament from across Northern Ireland: they were not just a credit to young people in Northern Ireland, or to the Youth Parliament; they were a credit to all of us.

As the conflict recedes into the distance, it might be easy to forget how much real progress has been made in that time. This is a real blessing. Children growing up today in Northern Ireland have not experienced and will not experience the routine violence that scarred communities for so long. However, we can never forget that more than 3,500 people lost their lives in that part of our United Kingdom. People and communities were exhausted by the conflict. It is one of the Labour party's proudest legacies that we, in government, were able to seize the moment and find a way forward. In April 1998, leaders from across political divides and communities decided that a new future was possible. That future was only there to grasp because a generation believed in their hearts that radical change was not just possible, but was deliverable in that moment.

We believe that the agreement, and the agreements that followed, have made Northern Ireland a better place, and we stand by them. A quarter of a century has gone by, and while the agreement has challenges, they should not distract from what it has delivered. As a result of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, people in Northern Ireland are now masters of their own destiny. The fact that that achievement was delivered through democratic means, not violence, partly explains why it endures and inspires reverence to this day. The rights and identities of all parts of communities are protected,

[Peter Kyle]

whether they choose to define themselves as British, Irish or both. People overwhelmingly voted for the agreement, giving it a lasting democratic legitimacy.

The peace that the agreement has brought is possible only thanks to the work of the police and security services, which defend it every single day. I pay tribute to the work of the PSNI in particular. We have all seen the news this week that the terror threat in Northern Ireland has been raised. What we must acknowledge is that police officers have been the focus of recent attacks by dissident republicans. Those groups are opposed to the Good Friday agreement. They attack the police because they want to intimidate those who protect its achievements, institutions and legacy. Those who carry out that violence are disgusted by the peace and stability achieved since 1998, because signs of a healthy, forward-moving society are also markers of their irrelevance to the better, prosperous future that Northern Irish people desire for themselves. They do not have any political or public support and they will not succeed. I hope the Secretary of State will give the PSNI all the support it needs as it faces down those who want to turn back the clock on this era of peace and progress.

Looking back on the agreement also offers us a guide for how to keep progress moving forward into the future. There are key lessons to be learnt that will make Northern Ireland more prosperous and make its politics work better. In reflecting on the lessons from the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, there are five key principles that we can apply today.

First, leadership matters. Tony Blair made Northern Ireland a priority in opposition and from day one as premier. It was no accident that the first visit he took as Prime Minister was to Belfast. The destination he wanted to reach was clear. It was, in his words:

"to see in place a fair political settlement in Northern Ireland—one that lasts, because it is based on the will and consent of the people".

That leadership from the then Prime Minister would not have made a difference if there were not so many others ready to lead their communities, too. All of them had to say uncomfortable things to their followers. In many cases, people did not want to hear what the path forwards was. John Hume and David Trimble deserved the Nobel peace prize for guiding their movements towards peace, but there were countless others who took risks for the reward of the agreement.

In the days after my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the leader of my party, appointed me as shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I was inundated with messages from people wishing me the best in a position that they considered to be very special. Almost all those well-wishers ended their messages by telling me that they were the person who did something to make the Good Friday agreement possible. In the 15 to 16 months since then, I have had the chance to reflect on the Good Friday agreement, grow into the job, meet people and gain experience. I can now say that each and every person who felt that they were the one who made peace possible was correct, because without every one of them making an enormous contribution in their own way, peace would not have been possible. It could not have been done by one person; it had to be done by legions of people, all acting together.

In our party, we are deeply proud of Mo Mowlam for the personal lengths to which she would go to nudge people forward towards peace. With the strength of her character, the uniqueness of her personality, she disrupted in a good way—only Mo could have weaponised a wig—and when she did, it pierced intransigence and could energise a room that was sinking towards stalemate.

Secondly, we should treat Northern Ireland and its people as a valued part of our Union. Our ambitions for Northern Ireland should match those that we have for the rest of the United Kingdom. When devolution is up and running again, it should not mean disengagement from Westminster. It is deeply worrying that power sharing has collapsed for so much of the last 25 years. The solution is to ensure that parties always have, and feel that they have, more agency from participating in Stormont than from being outside of it. No party should ever have to collapse it to get noticed.

One of the last things the Executive agreed was an ambitious energy strategy, which would see Northern Ireland make huge strides towards net zero. In the Labour party, we have a vision for a future where Northern Ireland is a key part of our green prosperity plan. For example, 50% of electricity in Northern Ireland already comes from renewables. There is the potential for much more after offshore wind farms are introduced, and much more sustainable energy production. The gains from the green transition will be felt across our country, and Northern Ireland is uniquely situated to be a place of pioneers. I talked to American businesses recently, and their eyes lit up when I mentioned the hydrogen buses that run in Belfast and are exported to other cities across Europe and beyond. All those green opportunities in Northern Ireland can be seized only if there is a stable devolved Government in place.

The third principle is to nurture a strong, trusting, instinctive relationship between the UK and Irish Governments. The relationship between the UK and Ireland reached a point where Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern were comfortable constantly working together in 1998. They could compromise without the fear that either would collapse the process for political gain. As guarantors, the UK and Irish Governments will always have to be in dialogue over how the agreement is functioning.

The fourth principle is to build respect among all communities. Westminster must be a voice for all of Northern Ireland, not just one part geographically, culturally or politically. The last Labour Government made progress because they positioned the UK as an honest broker for Northern Ireland. The aspirations of the Unionist and nationalist communities are both legitimate. Of course, one of the biggest changes since the agreement is the number of people who do not identify as either community.

There are also the victims of the troubles, who in many ways were left out of the agreement at the time. The UK Government owe them a great deal for the dignity they have shown in accepting a peace process that came too late for their loved ones. We can only move forward in reconciliation with their support.

The final lesson is to always persevere when talks stalls. Despite moments of extreme challenge and difficulty throughout the peace process, the UK Government never walked away. I recently read a brilliant article by Jonathan Stephens, who was an official in the Northern Ireland Office at the time of the peace talks and later

became permanent secretary at the Department. In it, he highlighted the importance of process in Northern Ireland, and how the process of the Good Friday negotiations could be applied to the recent framework negotiations on the protocol:

"A better process should involve…Northern Ireland parties as core participants alongside the UK government and the EU. Exclusively bilateral negotiations which keep out…representatives of the people of Northern Ireland will not deliver an outcome which is owned within Northern Ireland. However sensible, any outcome from such a narrow process risks being seen as an external solution imposed on Northern Ireland."

Of course, the framework is not going to be renegotiated, but the Government can clearly work with the Northern Ireland parties to help them to have a sense of ownership of it.

I have spoken about what we can learn from the agreement, but there are also contradictions in the current Northern Ireland policy that I would like the Secretary of State to address, if at all possible, because we need to learn the lessons of the last 25 years and apply them going forward. All the actions that the Government have taken on the protocol have been based on the argument that they listen to communities in Northern Ireland and address their concerns. That is an obligation as a sovereign Government for Northern Ireland. However, when it comes to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill, the Government seem happy to ignore that very same obligation. If the legacy Bill is passed into UK law while being opposed by all Northern Ireland parties and all victims groups, from all communities, it will damage the settlement created by the Good Friday agreement.

In summing up, I want to mention the influence that the Good Friday agreement has way beyond our country, too. It carries huge weight with our allies, especially those in the United States of America, who feel a personal connection to it. Unionists, nationalists and non-aligned parties were all present at a White House reception just a couple of weeks ago, which simply does not happen for any other devolved Administration in the world. Communities in conflict across the globe still look to the Good Friday agreement as proof and inspiration that peace is possible. I am hopeful that, in the next 25 years, people around the world will look to this agreement and see that it has led to prosperity, too.

2.20 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On this important anniversary, we have heard two wonderfully warm and heartfelt speeches from the Front Benches. It is sometimes not said but, as anybody who knows a shadow Secretary of State or a Secretary of State will know, these jobs always take a toll on people's lives, and the Northern Ireland jobs certainly do. The passion and commitment to Northern Ireland of the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State have shone through this afternoon, as they do in the work of the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). This House and the country owe the four of them an enormous debt of thanks and gratitude.

I have often wondered whether it was by chance—by happenstance, if you will—that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was concluded, after so many false starts, attempts, negotiations and tries, at the end of Holy Week and on the cusp of the joy of the Easter story. I actually think not, but I think the timing of the conclusion of those discussions had an impact. The days of Lent 1998, like any day of any Lent, reminded us of the hard graft, of the promises made and broken, of the hopes dashed and then revived.

Although the Good Friday agreement is seen as an early triumph of Sir Tony Blair, and rightly so, the seeds were planted and much of the heavy ploughing was undertaken, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State reminded the House, by Sir John Major's Government in the relationship he struck with the Taoiseach. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has heard from both former premiers in our inquiry on the Good Friday agreement, and their deep understanding and enduring affection for the people of Northern Ireland, and their commitment to that process, again shone through.

Returning to my Lenten theme, without turning my speech into some sort of homily, the horror of the Passion reminds us of the horror of the troubles and the bloody history that those working on the agreement were striving to bring to a conclusion. The horror of the Passion, represented by the troubles, was replaced with the joy of the Easter story, serving as a monument to the triumph of good over evil and light over darkness, transfiguring Northern Irish society through the agreement itself.

We know that there are many in Northern Ireland who sincerely and proudly profess a faith. I pray that this year's Easter story, against the backdrop of a non-functioning Stormont, will lead them to move forward with delivery, just as they did in the Lent and Easter of 1998.

We need to remind ourselves that there was nothing inevitable about success. Up until the 59th minute of the 11th hour, it could all have collapsed. As the Secretary of State said, the political bravery, courage and leadership of the parties in Northern Ireland, in the Republic and in this place combined to get the agreement over the line.

It is a worrying learning point from the Committee's inquiry that former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, Tony Blair and John Major all said that they very much doubt that the Good Friday agreement would have come to pass had social media existed in 1998. It is worrying that, as people retreat to their self-built echo chambers on social media, the bravery and leadership of politicians is being curtailed. I think, as does anybody who follows it, that brave political leadership and courage are as vital today as they were back in 1998.

We need to remind ourselves that this is not just an island of Ireland story or commemoration but is relevant to all our islands. The troubles that were unleashed brought mayhem and death that also shattered lives on the mainland, and we should never forget Brighton, Manchester, Warrington and the Baltic Exchange, to name just a few. This is such an important story in our nation's history.

I am pleased to hear what the Secretary of State said about education. We now have, thank God, several generations who learned about the troubles as history. John Major told a funny story at the end of our session. He had been in a lift in the States, and some young female students were nudging each other. One of them plucked up enough courage to say, "Excuse me, is it you?" Of course, there is only one answer to that

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question, and Sir John Major said, "Yes, it is." They said, "Yes, we thought it was. We are learning about you in history." We must make sure that today's young understand not just the what of the Good Friday agreement and the hope that it brings, but the why. Why did so many people go to so much trouble to bring a period of bloody history on these islands to a conclusion? We must make sure everyone understands that because, if we do not, people will not understand the price of peace.

Peace is a process, not an event. It is iterative and organic, not set in tablets of stone. As the Stormont House and St Andrews agreements indicate, it is capable of change and adaptation. But let us never forget that the Good Friday agreement is always the foundation stone on which any subsequent agreement and evolution is built. If we forget, we take it for granted. And if we take it for granted, we devalue the massive political and personal contributions made by so many people to get Northern Ireland to where it is today.

Let us look at the strands. I think east-west is going well. We had a shaky, testing time, but Dublin-Westminster relations are improving, and the Committee's visit to Dublin last week is testament to that. The Secretary of State and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister are held in high regard and growing affection by our Irish friends, which can only point to good things for future dialogue between the two premiers, which the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) mentioned. In the absence of the side conversations that often take place at Commission meetings and other EU gatherings, such dialogue is of ever greater importance.

It is unfortunate that north-south relations have atrophied and need to be resurrected. While respecting and recognising the two distinct geopolitical entities that make up the island of Ireland, we all know there is so much that can be done collaboratively, north-south, on the economy, the environment, tourism and energy—the shadow Secretary of State mentioned energy—to name but a few, to make life better for everyone. There is no weakness, no giving ground, if women and men of good will who want to see their communities do well, irrespective of whether they live in Northern Ireland or the Republic, are coming together, in this multilateral, international world in which we live, pulling in the same direction, in a common endeavour. It was always an aspiration, but an aspiration box that was opened as a result of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

Let me say a word or two about devolution. It is probably wise to say that, for the Government of Tony Blair—I entirely take the point the shadow Minister made about an ongoing commitment—international events that came shortly thereafter meant there was a bit of a temptation to devolve and forget. The taproots of devolution are deeply sunk, Mr Deputy Speaker, in your and my native Wales, and very deeply sunk in Edinburgh. The devolution plant in a Northern Ireland context is still a very tender specimen. It needs the guarantors—I am not saying that they should come in as a sort of domineering mothership—to be actively engaged in helping the parties to evolve and develop devolution. Direct rule has wisely been taken off the table by the Secretary of State, as has joint authority. Those are not options on the table, which can leave only devolution and Stormont.

I mentioned that this is a process. The ability to collapse the Assembly by veto or fiat needs to be calmly looked at an appropriate time, but I do not think that time is very far down the track. Sinn Féin collapsed it; it was wrong to do so. The DUP has collapsed it; it was wrong to do so, too. "Whataboutery" and two wrongs still do not make a right when it comes to the functioning of devolution. There has never been a good time to collapse the Assembly by veto, but to do so now is most certainly unjustifiable, in a post-covid, Ukraine-affected, cost of living crisis period. We need to see the same level of courage and commitment to wider public service—rather than narrow political service—that we saw in 1998 come to the fore. We need that to be resurrected.

We all understand the pivotal underpinning importance of consent in order to maintain that fine balance. We must continue in that tradition, but we need to reflect, in a grown-up, political way, across the parties, on how we deal with the growing of "the other" across the communities. We need to think about that. The approach of collapsing institutions is not within our UK tradition of public service. We need to see our Northern Irish political leaders recommit to and reaffirm the prospect of hope that the Good Friday agreement delivered. The public are no longer interested in political process; they want outcomes and they deserve them.

We meet to mark, reflect on and, yes, celebrate the Good Friday agreement, notwithstanding the circumstances of the increase in the security warning, the absence of Stormont and the shooting of Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell. We all wish we were doing so with everything functioning and more progress on the process. Some of the keyboard warriors, the scared agitators, those who feel threatened by the Good Friday agreement, and those who demanded the hardest Brexit in a vague hope that it would restore some tension between north and south and some sense of difference, are going to be frustrated. Doubtless they will be asking why all the fuss is being made here and in the coming weeks on the island of Ireland to celebrate this important event. To do so is to fundamentally miss the point, as they always do. The celebrations here today and across the island in the coming weeks mark and cherish what the human spirit, even when scarred by decades of mistrust and hatred, can achieve. They applaud the leadership, courage and vision of those men and women who said, "Enough is enough. No more. We can't go on like this." They came together and committed to drain the hearts of bitterness and refresh their souls with hope and determination to create better days ahead.

Let those who need to do so, as we approach the end of the Lenten season of 2023, resurrect that spirit and recommit to do the same. As we prepare to light a new Paschal candle, let us also relight the spirit of courage and determination. Let us reaffirm the progress that has been made and that still needs to be made. Let us never take it for granted. Let us always commemorate, celebrate and rejoice in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

2.35 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): This is the second debate in which I have participated in Westminster this week on the theme of the 25th anniversary of events. A debate was held a couple of days ago in Westminster Hall on the 25th anniversary of Welsh devolution, and it has been something of start for me to realise that I no

longer measure my involvement in party politics in years or decades, but do so in increments of quarter centuries and even more.

However, it has been an incredible privilege to listen to the contributions we have heard so far today and I very much look forward to those to come. It was also a great privilege to attend the last session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly in Belfast just a few weeks ago. It was a special session convened to mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement.

As part of that session, which was held in the magnificent debating Chamber at Stormont, it was fantastic to hear from some of the figures who played a key role in bringing about the agreement. We heard from the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern; Sir John Holmes, who served as the principal private secretary to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair; Baron Murphy of Torfaen, who was a Minister of State when the Good Friday agreement was signed and went on to serve as Secretary of State.

We were also party to a fantastic panel discussion involving members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition—Kate Fearon, Bronagh Hinds, Dr Avila Kilmurray and Jane Morrice, who were all ably chaired by the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth). Hearing their insights about the work that was done individually and collectively in communities to bring people to a space where, irrespective of the tradition people had come from, they could sign up to the principles of this and move forward to put Northern Ireland on a better path was truly inspirational. It was fascinating to hear that and to hear about the work that was done to make sure that the Good Friday agreement could not only come about, but take root and take effect. I found that a very valuable transfusion of knowledge from the generation of politicians and officials who had been there on the ground at the time to the cohort of politicians who have been charged with taking an interest, moving things on and creating the political environment in which we hope relations can continue to move forward in a positive direction in our own time.

We know what the key parts of the agreement were and all that flowed from them. We saw the establishment of new institutions, such as the Northern Irish Assembly, the Northern Ireland Executive and the North South Ministerial Council. It led the way to the decommissioning under the supervision of General de Chastelain. Much to the angst, anxiety and pain of many, it saw prisoner release as part of that process. It also saw the British Government committing to incorporating the European convention on human rights into the law of Northern Ireland and established the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. I have no doubt that, all through that, a number of untidy compromises needed to be made and there were a lot of concessions that must have tasted quite bitter at the time. It required tremendous movement on all sides, from historical, and perhaps even established and comfortable, positions. I certainly do not underestimate the personal toll that the leadership that was required to effect those positional changes must have taken on the participants.

It is also very difficult to overestimate the wider importance of the Good Friday agreement and the role that it played not only in the peace process in Northern Ireland, but in inspiring others in contested polities and areas around the world in providing an example of how progress can be made. The DNA underpinning the agreement is that of a recognition of the need for equality and depolarisation, mutual respect, and respect for the civil rights and religious liberties of everyone in the community.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is right to recognise the contribution that politicians from all sides made in Northern Ireland, but some of the good qualities that were shown then were also exercised in South Africa, with the beginnings of a peace that brought together divided communities that were so far apart. That was also an example for South Africa as it moved forward, as it has been for other countries, some of which have been more successful than others. South Africa is an example of where Northern Ireland's specific knowledge was used to its benefit.

Richard Thomson: I thank the hon. Member for sharing that insight. South Africa is indeed one of the examples that we could have chosen, but I am sure that Northern Ireland serves as an inspiration elsewhere and to many others in terms of how contested political status can be worked through. Perhaps most important of all, it reinforced the principle of consent—that the UK had no selfish or strategic interest in Northern Ireland and that the people of Northern Ireland had the absolute right to choose their own constitutional future, which in turn was recognised by the Irish Government removing their territorial claim on Northern Ireland from the Republic's constitution. It represented a stepping back from some of the comforting certainties and absolutes that had dominated the discussion on the future of Northern Ireland to open up a space where, yes, identity still mattered—how could it not?—but where that political space could be shared more easily and where people's birthright to identify and to be accepted as British or Irish, or even both, and to hold citizenship for both states could be a reality. As the late great John Hume said, it also allowed Northern Ireland the chance to take the gun out of Irish politics.

In this 25th anniversary year, it is inevitable that there will be a focus on the strand 1 institutions. Certainly, I have expressed on more than one occasion my own disappointment that the North South Ministerial Council remains in abeyance, that Stormont is not sitting at a time when political direction from that Government and from politicians directly elected by the people of Northern Ireland is needed, arguably, more than it has ever been, given some of the challenges that are faced by the people of Northern Ireland on day-to-day issues of public sector delivery. But there are still many positives to take from the place that we are at.

Although I have lived through the history of the Good Friday agreement in my lifetime, it is inevitably from the prism of a viewpoint from Scotland, rather than from the perspective of somebody who has lived in Northern Ireland. Although I am wary of making too many comparisons and observations, on my visits to Northern Ireland since taking up the spokespersonship, I have been struck by the differences between what we used to see in grainy television footage from years gone by and the reality of modern Northern Ireland on the ground, the prosperity and vibrancy across Northern Ireland.

That prosperity is undeniable, both on the ground and in the statistics. Again, how could it not be? The reason for this is well captured in a report by the Irish

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Business and Employers Confederation, which noted that the Good Friday agreement had brought about

"a growing impact on stability and certainty, both in Ireland and in Britain, and a positive impact on economic growth and investment."

OCO Global noted in a recent report:

"Exports have more than doubled since 1998, with GDP per capita growth exceeding most other parts of the UK."

So there is little doubt that the peace dividend has brought a prosperity dividend. As we have heard from earlier contributions and interventions, it is perhaps easy, particularly for those who have not lived through the past quarter century and have no direct memory of the troubles, to take some of the advances of that period for granted.

For all the prosperity, we still see signs of a divided society today—a society that is more divided that we would wish it to be, whatever strides forward have been taken. We can see it from the prosperity of central Belfast: the peace walls that still snake their way out through the communities around the centre. We can see that physical segregation. We can see the segregation that continues in schools and in housing. For all that Northern Ireland has firmly embraced peace, we have had a salutary reminder this week, with the raising of the level of the terrorist threat, that there are elements in Northern Irish society that remain and prosper in the shadows of criminality, who would not hesitate to return to violence and intimidation to advance their agendas, given the opportunity.

The future is very much better now than it was 25 years ago. There was optimism then. Perhaps in the 25 years, the optimism has not lived up to the levels of optimism we had, but there can be absolutely no doubt that Northern Ireland is a society transformed from then. The future is still something to be written. Agreements evolve and develop and circumstances change. There is no bigger circumstance than Brexit, which has caused significant turbulence in British-Irish relationships, particularly in Northern Ireland. It damaged trust, and much needs to be done to restore that trust. That requires mature leadership, and the effective operation of the strand 1 institutions can very much play a part in that.

It was inevitable that the circumstance of Brexit would force a reappraisal among people of these islands, particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland, about the political relationships that they would wish to have and the future to which they aspire. As that happens, it is very important to go back to the key element of the Good Friday agreement and to respect the principle of consent—just as those who brought the Good Friday agreement into existence a quarter of a century ago recognised that it had to be at the heart of progress in Northern Ireland.

2.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My friend and colleague, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), said that I might be called first. I did not expect to be called first, but this is pretty near the beginning, so thank you for that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

First, may I say a big thank you to all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions? They have been measured and careful. Mine will be the same, although there are some things that I need to say in relation to where we were at that time, and where we got to as the process moved forward.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) referred to his 25 years of experience. I have a confession to make: I started out in 1985 as a councillor. I did 26 years as a councillor and 12 years as an MLA, and I have done 13 years as an MP. I think it is the start of my 39th year as an elected representative in May. When the hon. Gentleman gets to that point, he will have met his target. Have I matched the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)? I suspect that I may not be anywhere near his achievements—but that is by the way.

Simon Hoare: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting we should have a debate to commemorate those years of service as well?

Jim Shannon: Definitely not. I would not ask the hon. Gentleman to endure that—that would be too much of a challenge.

I say this very gently: I never cease to be amazed by people suggesting that the DUP is or was opposed to the Good Friday agreement. I want put that on the record, because it is important to do so. The reason for that suggestion is undoubtedly the fact that we did not support the Good Friday agreement in 1998. The events of the last 25 years cannot be collapsed into an appreciation of a world frozen in time in 1998. Not one year but 25 years have passed, and if we want to build on the Good Friday agreement to promote peace for the next 25 years, we must never lose sight of that fact.

Although that suggestion no doubt fits the caricatures through which many prefer to operate, the truth is that the DUP was never completely opposed to the Good Friday agreement. The agreement always contained significant elements that we supported, such as power sharing and cross-community consent. I understand exactly how the communities came together and brought that forward: two completely opposing traditions had to find a methodology through which we could agree on a democratic process and move forward.

Before I go into any more detail, I want to put on the record my thanks to all those people who served. The Secretary of State rightly referred to the contribution and service of the police officers of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the PSNI, and the soldiers of the Ulster Defence Regiment. I declare an interest, since I served in that regiment for three years and served 11 and a half years as a territorial soldier, so I was a part-timer for 14 and a half years. Their sacrifices and contributions were so significant to moving the peace process forward so that we could find a future that we can, hopefully, agree on for our children and our grandchildren. I have three boys, all married, and six grandchildren. I want my legacy to my six grandchildren to be a future where they can get on together, live in harmony and have equal rights with everyone. That is my choice.

The Good Friday agreement always contained significant elements that we supported, and I have referred to power sharing and cross-community consent. The reason the DUP could not support the Good Friday agreement in 1998 was that it involved the release of murderers from prison back into the community, where they could

live alongside the families of those they had murdered. I know there are MPs in this House—I am one of them—who represent constituencies where people have been released from prison, causing great angst to people in the community, and those MPs have reflected that in the House. The Home Secretary has responded many times to questions that I and others have asked about that, so hon. Members can understand why we suffered angst over it at the time.

The Good Friday agreement also involved welcoming the political wing of the IRA into government at a time when the IRA had not decommissioned its weapons. Those were two critical issues for us at the time—two things to which the Democratic Unionist party could not and would not reconcile itself—and a large proportion of the population of Northern Ireland shared those concerns.

However, let me make it clear now that that did not mean we did not support the rest of the Good Friday agreement. Nor did it mean that we were unwilling to fight for the rest of the agreement. That commitment resulted in the seminal St Andrews agreement process, which we in the DUP thought—and I think the Government accepted—made the Good Friday agreement process even better, because it addressed the issue of decommissioning, which helped the democratic process to move forward.

The truth is that the Good Friday agreement, amended by the St Andrews agreement, lays a foundation for a stronger and better future. I believe that very strongly and so does our party. It forms the foundation for everything we have done in government since 2007 when, for the first time, we agreed to power sharing—an agreement that opened the door to a period of relative stability in the governance of Northern Ireland until 2017.

I was an MLA at the time, and I was very pleased to support my leader, Dr Paisley. I am glad that the Secretary of State referred to him, by the way, because we need to remember all the architects who made the process move forward, and he was one of them. Perhaps not everybody in our party had the same confidence that we had in 2007, but we went ahead with the process and, as it went forward, those who perhaps were not 100% convinced began to feel that the process was one to pursue and support.

The lesson that we can take from the 10-year period of relative stability from 2007 to 2017 is that it is only possible to make progress when we fashion an environment that both Unionists and nationalists can buy into. That is the whole secret of this process; it is the secret of where we are going and what we need to aim for. The journey from 1998 to 2007 was worth it because it created an arrangement that rose to that challenge.

If we want to secure a positive future from the vantage point of today—we can always look back with great knowledge, because we know what happened—we must recognise that, tragically, the delicate balance of our politics has been destabilised by the EU creating an imperative for the construction of a new arrangement that Unionists cannot buy into. Yet as I look to the future, I am very clear that the greatest threat to peace arises from the threat to the Good Friday agreement. We should be in no doubt that the threat is now acute.

If the United Kingdom is to honour its treaty obligations in the Good Friday agreement, they must be respected in domestic legislation. How, then, are the key commitments in that agreement given expression in UK law? I will refer to three Good Friday agreement commitments that are particularly important for Unionists. I want to put them on the record in a constructive fashion to lay out the scene and make a case.

The first is the principle of consent. That is given effect by the following text in the treaty:

> "While a substantial section of the people in Northern Ireland share the legitimate wish of a majority of the people of the island of Ireland for a united Ireland, the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union and, accordingly…Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish; and…it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people".

That is as clear as can be, and there should not be any issue. That commitment is clear and prohibits any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland that involves a shift away from government by the UK towards more government by the Republic of Ireland, save with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

People say that national opinion polls are not always entirely accurate. Well, there can be a variation of 3% either way. I will quote two polls just to put on the record the feelings of the people of Northern Ireland today. A national opinion poll in *The Times* in August last year indicated that about 50% of people in Northern Ireland wanted to stay in the United Kingdom and 27% wanted to go with a united Ireland, while the other 23% were non-aligned voters. The *Belfast Telegraph* did a similar poll on the non-aligned voters, and it found that 53% of those people wanted to stay within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The point that I am making is that the vast majority of people—be they big "U" Unionists or small "u" unionists—want to stay within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We believe that that is very important.

It was understood by the Unionist community that that protection was translated into domestic law—in section 1 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998—and it was on that basis that we signed up to the Good Friday agreement, including the DUP from 2007. When the protocol was introduced, it effected a significant change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, partly suspending article VI of the Act of Union to protect the integrity of a new legal regime in Northern Ireland, made for and by a polity of which Northern Ireland is not a part and in whose legislature it has no representation. Specifically, the people of Northern Ireland found themselves subject to laws in 300 areas that would be made for them by a legislature representing the Republic of Ireland, in which they had no representation. Unionists went to court to get that struck down on the basis of the consent protection in the Good Friday agreement, as a significant change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, involving a shift in governance for some purposes from the UK towards the Republic of Ireland, had been effected without any attempt to secure prior sanction from the majority of the population. That was a significant change, and one that concerns us.

Government lawyers responded by arguing that the relevant domestic legislation had not given effect to the Good Friday agreement consent provision that prevents any change in the constitutional status of Northern

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Ireland, save with the consent of the majority of the population. Instead, they argued that the relevant legislation—section 1 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998—prevents one specific change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, save with the consent of the majority of the population: the complete departure of Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom to join the Republic of Ireland. The Court agreed with the Government lawyers.

The second protection that has now been ignored is the principle of cross-community consent. The relevant cross-community consent provisions in the Good Friday agreement commit the state parties to

"arrangements to ensure key decisions are taken on a cross-community basis".

That was translated effectively into section 42 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. However, the Supreme Court has ruled that these protections no longer apply in relation to article 18 votes on the protocol by the Assembly because section 42 has to be read subject to section 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. There have been completely disingenuous attempts to argue that this is acceptable because the agreement only requires cross-community consent for Stormont decisions if they pertain to devolved matters. That makes no sense at all and is terribly disappointing.

The principle that there can be no majority votes in Stormont when one community objects is not an innovation of the Good Friday agreement—it is a basic convention of Stormont politics of the past that goes back way beyond 1998 to 1972. The Parliament of Northern Ireland that operated from 1921 until 1971 did so on a majority basis, which was believed to have been a contributing factor to the outbreak of the troubles from 1969. I would subscribe that some of the ways that politics were done in those days contributed to the problems. When the UK Government intervened to terminate the Parliament of Northern Ireland in 1972, they sought to replace it with a power-sharing arrangement, and from 31 March 1972, it has been a principle of Northern Ireland governance that governance through Stormont must operate on the basis of non-majoritarianism.

The Good Friday agreement is not significant for limiting the application of that convention, to say that henceforth, from 1998, it is okay for majority decisions to be made from Stormont so long as they are not on devolved matters. Instead, its significance arises from its affirmation of the central importance of the convention that decisions from Stormont must be made on a cross-community basis if either community requires it.

The political problems flowing from the Supreme Court judgment are huge, and I want to put them on record. I welcome the fact that we are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the agreement, but our reasons for being objective at that time were the two conditions that we sought relating to our concern over the release of prisoners and the holding of arms, as decommissioning had not taken place. One can only begin to appreciate the difficulty when one has regard for the nature of the majority decision that is proposed by article 18 of the protocol. The provision on cross-community consent is not invoked all the time; many votes at Stormont are on a majority basis. The point of the cross-community provision is that if ever either community feels that a measure brought before Stormont constitutes an existential threat to it, that community can be protected by invoking its right to use the cross-community consent mechanism. Mindful of that, we must ask, does the removal of the cross-community consent of article 18 matter that much?

The article 18 vote, which could happen any time from 1 November 2024, will not just be controversial but will be more controversial that any majority vote of the Parliament of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1971. It brings a constitutional change not within Northern Ireland but between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, effecting a transfer of governance from the UK towards the Republic of Ireland, as laws that were once made by the UK are made in a context that does not involve the United Kingdom but does involve the Republic of Ireland. The proposal is that next year, rather than moving forward, we will unfortunately move back not simply to the early 1970s, which would be bad enough, but to an even more difficult time that has not yet been experienced. That would be catastrophic and cannot be allowed to happen.

The third protection of the Good Friday agreement that is of particular importance for Unionists is the commitment by the state parties to uphold the right of the people of Northern Ireland to

"pursue democratically national and political aspirations".

That right has to be understood from the point when it was embraced in 1998-99, when the people of Northern Ireland had the right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations by standing for election to make all the laws to which they were subject. The protocol and the Windsor framework terminate this because they create a situation in which the people of Northern Ireland can no longer pursue democratically national and political aspirations in relation to 300 areas of law to which we are subject. So far, 640 laws have been imposed in relation to which our Good Friday agreement right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations has been taken away. These are now made for us by a polity of which we are not a member and in whose legislature we have no representation.

It is very striking that as we approach the 25th anniversary of the agreement, with the desire of many to celebrate—and it is right to celebrate it—the greatest attacks on the agreement are taking place right now. Some of the parties that were fully supportive of it seem to be pointing their fingers and asking questions. Going forward, these matters cannot be papered over. We must remember that progress in Northern Ireland has only ever occurred when it has been possible to fashion a framework that both Unionists and nationalists can buy into. I say it again: that was the secret of the process in 1998. That was the secret of the process in 2007, and it is the secret of the process today in 2023. It was the secret behind the 10 years of stability between 2007 and 2017, and its demise—especially since 2021—is entirely the result of ignoring the reality.

I finish with this: the UK Government now have a choice. I for one hope that they will learn the lessons of the 2007 to 2017 period, and will ensure going forward that the Good Friday agreement, amended by the St Andrews agreement, is upheld and not ignored. If they do not, then for many in Northern Ireland and for myself, I fear for the future of Northern Ireland.

3.5 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate: what we may lack in numbers has been more than made up for by the quality of all the speeches we have heard thus far. Maybe it is a sign that we have taken what was achieved 25 years ago for granted, but I agree with at least two speakers who have said that we should never, ever, ever do that.

It is an occasion to say thank you, and many people have been thanked. There are two people who have not been mentioned so far: Margaret Thatcher and Garret FitzGerald. The 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement was hugely significant in the series of events that led up to what happened 25 years ago, because it embraced the legacy of the history that has bound Ireland and Britain together. It put to rest the idea that what was happening in Northern Ireland was a trouble in just a part of the United Kingdom that had no relationship to what had gone on over 800 years, from the original Norman invasion and the claim of the English kings to the land of Ireland, and the way in which the Irish people were denied their land, their voice, their language, their culture and their political representation during the course of those 800 bloody years.

John Major, of course, also helped to lay the foundation, and Tony Blair, Bertie Ahern and Mo Mowlam have been mentioned already. We should add George Mitchell, as well as Jonathan Powell, who probably spent more time than anyone else on the shuttle from London to Belfast, back and forth to help lay the groundwork. As the Secretary of State said, countless other people—many others, some of whom have been mentioned—contributed to this unique moment.

I grew up in London. I watched the reporting of the troubles on the television and I read about it in the newspapers, and I will be frank: like many people, I despaired at what I was seeing. If you lived in London during the 1970s and 1980s and you got on the underground, you would look around the carriage to try to see if there were any bags that did not appear to belong to anyone who was travelling. For as long as I live, I will never forget the only time that I have heard a bomb go off. I was in bed, and it was this sound—you might think it is a bang, but as I heard it, it was a kind of deep thump. It appeared to be so close that I got out of bed, got dressed and went down to Kensington High Street, which is where I was living at the time. I thought that it must have been there; it turned out that it was two and a half miles away, but the sound had travelled through the night air.

If someone had said to me at that precise moment, "I know you may be despairing, Hilary, and look at all of this violence, but at some point in the future, the man who in opposition to the agreement that Margaret Thatcher signed famously stood up and said, 'Never! Never! Never! Never!' and a former leader of the provisional IRA will sit side by side with each other as the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of a power-sharing Government", I would probably have said to that person, "I would love to live to see that, but I do not suppose I will." But I did—we did. That tells us how extraordinary that moment was.

What was achieved in the run-up to the event we are celebrating was astonishing. It was inspirational and full of hope. I trust there is nobody in the country who has not watched the last episode of "Derry Girls". I think the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) has referred to it in a previous speech. I watched that episode—anyone who did was profoundly moved—and I wept, I will be frank, because it conveyed the sense of hope that that process had brought to pass. For those who have not watched it, it is set against the background of the run-up to the referendum that took place in May in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. The episode just crystallised that sense of hope that the agreement gave to the people of both those places.

Having taken that step, those entrusted with political responsibility in Northern Ireland have a duty—I use that word advisedly—to make the institutions work. We have seen how one side and then the other has walked away, because they are capable of doing so, collapsing the institutions. I understand the reasons, perhaps more so in the latter case than in the former, in what began I think as a row over the renewable heat incentive in Northern Ireland. It was actually about other things—the Irish language Act, the honouring of agreements that had been entered into and so on—but there is a great responsibility from the legacy to make those institutions work, because the agreement has given something so precious to the people of Northern Ireland, which is not absolute peace, but peace that is so much better than what had happened before.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made reference to service, I was sitting here calculating. I served 20 years as a councillor and have served nearly 24 years here in this House, so I am heading for 44 years as an elected representative. We get elected, and I think the public expects us to turn up and do our job. Why do we work so hard to get elected if we are not going to turn up and do our job? There is also a responsibility on others not to do anything that will undermine what was achieved 25 years ago. That is why the Windsor framework was so important. The parties to the negotiations finally realised that as well as dealing with relations between Britain and the EU going forward, something very special was at stake.

The last point I want to make is about the lessons. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) made a terrific contribution from the Front Bench and reflected on some of those lessons. The first is that peace is built step by step. In thanking a whole load of people, one is going back in history over a long time. There are so many stages one could mention, but one is the sheer brilliance of the decommissioning process. If we think about it, the Provisional IRA was not under any circumstances going to hand over its weapons to the British Army it had been fighting. So great minds thought, "How the hell are we going to deal with this?" Someone came up with a brilliant idea: "What if we get someone independent and trusted, such as General de Chastelain?"—he has been referred to and should also be thanked—"and he will go to the places where the weapons have been put beyond use? He will come back and tell all of us, 'Yes, I have seen them, they are there. They are not capable of being used any more.'" That was true for the weapons of the provisionals and of the loyalists.

When we are trying to build confidence step-by-step, the side that has experienced the violence of the other says, "They say they have given up, but how do I know?"

[Hilary Benn]

There was a deep well of distrust, pain and bitterness because of all the lives that had been lost as a result of violence on all sides, yet that is how that part of the process was achieved.

The second lesson is persistence. All of those who did their bit over the years did not give up. I say to the Chair of the Select Committee, who reflected on what I think Tony Blair said about if Twitter had existed, that Twitter is not the real world, although we sometimes think it is. When we are looking for feedback on what we have been saying and we go on Twitter, there are plenty of people who will give us their opinion, but it is not the real world. Holding to a belief you have and your determination to achieve it is very important.

The third lesson is courage, which has been touched on. In conflicts and when people feel a wrong has been done, it is actually much easier to sit there and say, "I'm the victim, and you are my oppressor", but then go around to the other side of the table—the mythical table—and the person there says, "No, no. I am the victim, and you are the oppressor." We should reflect on the degree of courage that was required on the Unionist side—David Trimble and others—to say to the Unionist community, "You know what, they're nearly half of the population, and we're going to have to share power with them." We should also reflect on the courage it took on the Provisional IRA side—Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams—to say, "You know what, lads, we cannot bomb Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom." Those were two very courageous things to have said and steps to have taken at great personal risk, but without them, this would not have happened. The other lesson there is that nobody can want peace more than the parties to the conflict themselves—nobody. The outside involvement, with the efforts of the Americans and others, was hugely important, but in the end the parties to the conflict have to recognise that the game is up and that they have to compromise in the interests of peace. Of course, there is also leadership, because it is leadership that enables courage to turn into achievement.

This is one of the legacies of the Good Friday agreement. There is a wonderful organisation called Forward Thinking, which some Members in the House may know. It works in the middle east to try to build discussion and relationships between the parties to the conflict there. One of the things it does is bring people to Northern Ireland and the Republic; it says, "Sit down and listen to what people who were in effect fighting each other 25 years and more ago can tell you about how they transformed the lives of the people in their community by showing persistence, courage and political leadership."

The final thing I want to say is that it is in many ways easy to say no, and it is sometimes really difficult to say yes, yet when we do so, just look at what can be achieved. That, I think for all of us, is the true legacy of that miraculous Good Friday 25 years ago.

3.18 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). Following on from the two previous speakers, I can offer only 30 years of continuous service in elected office. *[Interruption.]* I am on a slippery slope.

I may be the only person in this debate who was actually present in the room when the Good Friday agreement was concluded, so perhaps I can give some of the inside track on what happened. I suppose the most relevant thing to say is that we have named this agreement the Good Friday agreement. Officially, it is the Belfast agreement, but around the world it is known as the Good Friday agreement. That largely came about by accident, because the deadline was set for 5 o'clock on the previous day—the Thursday. Members know what we are like with deadlines in Northern Ireland, but if everything had gone to time, this would have been called the Holy Thursday or the Maundy Thursday agreement, which perhaps does not have quite the same ring to it. Given some of the narrative we have had over the past 25 years, I am not quite sure whether the Judas Iscariot moment would have added to the notions of betrayal we have had from some limited quarters in those 25 years.

What happened was that the officials essentially stopped the clock for 24 hours and pretended everything was going to plan. With true civil service efficiency, however, the catering contract was only booked until 5 o'clock on the Thursday, so the delegates were deprived of food and water for the final 24 hours, although I believe some people did sneak out. At that time we were just starting to benefit from the introduction of 24 hour supermarkets in Northern Ireland, and some people did smuggle in supplies at 4 o'clock in the morning. That was the final drive towards getting this over the line, but of course, as has been alluded to, there are many other people who did the hard graft in getting us to that point. I thank the Secretary of State for commenting on my party's role, in particular that of Lord Alderdice, our leader then.

Mention has rightly been made of those from the various Governments, but I will single out one person who made an enormous personal sacrifice in that week: the then Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. It is not widely known that his mother died at the start of that week, but he stuck with the negotiations, given their importance, and only briefly went back down to Dublin for her funeral before returning to ensure that the talks got over the line.

I will try to be measured in my comments as today is not an occasion to get into some of the deep political discussions we are currently having, although I will allude to them, I hope in a calm way. It is important to acknowledge our successes. The agreement was essentially about the three-stranded process—the internal governance of Northern Ireland and the north-south and east-west aspects—alongside the principle of consent, which is crucial for the constitutional issue, equality and human rights, and reform of policing and criminal justice. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, some people had to accept some difficult things, while others, I say with respect, decided to take a different view around issues such as the early release of prisoners.

The agreement is now the de facto constitution of Northern Ireland. When Northern Ireland was founded in 1921 there was a certain degree of controversy, and there were difficult periods during most of the existence of the previous Stormont Parliament. There was lack of equality in Northern Ireland; equally, Northern Ireland was not recognised by large sections of the nationalist community. The trade-off was, for the first time, in

effect, that the nationalist section of the community accepted the legitimacy of Northern Ireland, alongside the Irish Government removing articles 2 and 3 of their constitution, in return for power sharing and equality. There was recognition of the principle of consent that Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK until and unless the majority decide otherwise. That is in essence the Good Friday agreement.

Considerable progress has been made over the past 25 years. We have a much more peaceful society now, but it is important that we recognise that that is now qualified because of the threat from both dissident republicans and loyalist paramilitaries. There is also continued paramilitary organised crime activity and control of communities. We are also a much more prosperous society than in the 1990s and earlier. If anyone who visited Northern Ireland in the '70s and '80s were to return now, they would be struck by the huge transformation, but that must also be qualified: while many have had new, life-changing opportunities, large sections of the population have still been left behind, with a lack of opportunity to transform their lives, and we must be seized of that.

We have also seen huge diversity in two key respects. First, a lot of people have come to Northern Ireland from other parts of the world. They have made it their home and been made very welcome. Secondly, there has been a change in conceptions of identity—a number of speakers have alluded to that—and how people see themselves. People have moved away from traditional notions of identity, in particular the two communities model. That has been seen through the growth of my party, but there are many other factors as well. It is particularly notable among young people.

There is unfinished business around victims and legacy—I will not dwell on that point today; we will debate it in due course in this Chamber—and on what needs to be done to address the Bill of Rights aspect of the agreement. We have seen large steps forward on reconciliation and moves towards a shared and integrated society, but we are not there entirely just yet. We still have large patterns of segregation in our society. Our children are still largely educated separately and too many people live in what are deemed to be single-identity areas. We have seen some progress on integrated schools and mixed housing in recent years, but there is a lot more to do. And of course, we have the current political instability, with the absence of the institutions. It is worth noting that over the past 25 years the institutions have been operational for only 60% of the time. They have been down for 40% of that time, which is not really tenable in what we would like to see as a functioning, stable democracy.

I will not dwell too much on Brexit, but it is relevant to the debate. I often say that Northern Ireland can only really work through sharing and interdependence. For that, we have needed open free borders to balance north-south and east-west flows, alongside internal power sharing. Brexit poses a challenge in that regard. There is no perfect solution to mitigating its impact, but I believe that the original protocol provided a soft landing for us. I welcome the Windsor framework in providing an even softer landing for Northern Ireland from those particular challenges. There are still no guarantees that it will work for Northern Ireland. We have to keep ploughing on and address ongoing issues as they come along, but I believe we are now in a much better place.

We need to be very conscious of the impact of what the Government may do in due course on the European convention on human rights. Even if they remain a party to the Council of Europe in that respect, if barriers are put up to people accessing their rights under the convention, that will run contrary to the agreement itself. It is worth stressing that human rights have been crucial to the reform of policing and criminal justice.

Sadly, as we approach the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement we do not have functioning institutions. My party has consistently called for reform. When I say consistently, I am going right back to 1998. We strongly supported the Good Friday agreement as a new start for Northern Ireland, but even at the time we were conscious of the, shall we say, rather rigorous form of power sharing—or consociationism, to give it its formal academic term—and the system of designations, whereby people had to sign in as either a Unionist or nationalist, or by default become "another". My identity, according to the agreement, is "another", rather than any positive affirmation.

The agreement does allow for reform. It can and should evolve to take account of changed circumstances. Reform can take place in any context, but it is particularly vital now, with the institutions down. It remains to be seen if and when they will be restored over the coming weeks or months, or ever, depending on how we analyse the current situation. Some people will make the case that reform cannot take place in the absence of stable functioning institutions. I would say that, instead, we perhaps need to have reform first in order to get stable functioning political institutions. We can return to that tension on another occasion. In a similar way, people talk about the need to take forward reform by consensus, but if we are talking about trying to challenge the current vetoes that certain parties have and we give them a veto over the process of removing their vetoes, how likely are they to give up those vetoes? There has to be a role for the two Governments to try to drive that process forward.

There are three areas of reform that I wish to highlight. The first is on the system of designations. We need to move away from that towards a system of weighted majority on key decision making that still provides cross-community protection, but without locking ourselves into the rigorous notion of identity, which sometimes can become a bit of a straitjacket. We should move towards some form of voluntary coalition, or a coalition of the willing, where parties move in and out of government. Again, putting in place a threshold of support to ensure that any Government are cross-community in their nature would be more in keeping with how coalition Governments are formed in other places around the world. Before we even get to that type of governance, in the event of a blockage on the current restoration of the Executive, a much more limited reform could be put in place if a party decides not to take up the place of either First Minister or Deputy First Minister, to let the next party—at present my own party, but that is not the motivation—take office and see if they can establish a Government of sorts. Northern Ireland badly needs its Government restored.

Finally, I want to talk about a quarter of a century of prosperity. People have rightly said that the past 25 years have been about the consolidation of peace. We have made huge strides in that regard, but Northern Ireland is still not living up to its potential in respect of

[Stephen Farry]

prosperity. We first need to ensure that we have political stability. We must also make sure that we invest in the various drivers of the economy and in particular skills. We have the potential, under the Windsor framework, to become a focal point of inward investment, given our advantages of dual market access. We need to make sure that that becomes a reality. I do not envy the Secretary of State's job in that regard. A budget has to be struck for Northern Ireland in the very near future to give certainty to Government Departments. But at present, we are talking about a burning platform, and a cycle of cuts. If that is not arrested, we will look towards decline.

In that context, my party is keen to have a conversation with the Government about some form of public service transformation fund or prosperity fund for Northern Ireland, to try to break this vicious cycle. There has been a history of generous packages from the UK Government that have not been, shall we say, fully taken advantage of or have been squandered in different ways. We must learn why that has happened. We must recognise that any generosity from the Treasury to give Northern Ireland the chance to build on the past 25 years will need to come with quite strict conditions.

At present, I do not see any way forward to break through that cycle, to do proper investment, to save and transform public services, to invest in skills and to take advantage of opportunities, unless we have that particular helping hand. I appreciate that that is difficult, particularly in the current public expenditure climate, but I encourage the Government to give that serious consideration. That is difficult if there is no clear indication among the parties that they are on the brink of restoring the Assembly, but as and when that move begins, I hope that the Government will be a willing partner. The ball should be in the court of the parties to come up with a coherent plan. I am up for that challenge, along with my colleagues.

3.33 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Good Friday agreement is one of the greatest achievements of a Labour Government. I am proud to stand here today to celebrate the 25th anniversary of that historic moment when communities came together and took a leap of faith for a better future.

I would like to reflect on the particular role that women played in the peace process. For centuries, women in Northern Ireland have been crossing divides and coming together for the greater good. Nowhere was that more prevalent than during the troubles. During that time, extraordinary women stood up for peace. Those women came from fundamentally different backgrounds, but their aim was always clear.

Among the titans of the Northern Ireland women's movement is May Blood, Baroness Blood of Blackwatertown, who sadly passed away last autumn. May left a huge legacy, from her tireless campaigning for workers' rights to her work in building peace in Northern Ireland. She helped to set up the cross-community Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in 1996 and was a tireless campaigner for integrated education. May went on to become the first woman from Northern Ireland to be appointed to the House of Lords, and my party was honoured that May sat as a Labour peer.

Another significant figure in the peace process is Pat Hume, who over decades worked side by side with her husband, John Hume, one of the architects of the peace process. Pat ran John's constituency office from the early days of the civil rights movement, through the troubles and the Good Friday agreement, until John retired in 2005. Pat was his backbone and his trusted adviser. Today, the John and Pat Hume Foundation recognises the critical role that Pat played alongside John, and reflects their legacy by working to support and inspire leadership for peaceful change.

As a woman in the Labour party, and as a north-east MP, I could not stand here without paying tribute to the former Member of Parliament for Redcar and one of the Secretary of State's predecessors, my friend and colleague Mo Mowlam. Mo was a giant of the Labour movement and a friend to everyone on the island of Ireland who stands on the side of peace. I am so glad to be able to say that I had the privilege of meeting and working with Mo as one of our north-east MPs. I remember well her inimitable, no-nonsense style when she met Unison members in the north-east.

Appointed Secretary of State on Labour's victory in 1997, she would go on to play a fundamental role in bringing about the agreement, with a no-nonsense approach that brought everyone into the discussion, regardless of belief. She managed to break through in a way that none of her predecessors, all of them men, had been able to do.

Of course, to say that Mo made such progress simply because she was a woman would be to downplay the tremendous skills and determination that she brought to the role. However, as a woman, her actions had greater reverberations. When she walked into the notorious Maze prison in 1998, just by stepping through the door, she showed how serious she was about bringing peace to Northern Ireland. On that visit, she was able to achieve exactly what she had gone in to do.

Mo managed to achieve all of that while living with her illness. It is a testament to her that her name is still so deeply associated with the Good Friday agreement, 25 years after it was signed and 18 years since she died. It is quite right that that is the case.

The greatest legacy of Mo, Pat Hume, May Blood and the countless other women who fought for peace is not simply peace itself. It is the prosperity, progress and confidence of Northern Ireland today. Mo once said:

> "People working together can overcome many obstacles, often within themselves, and together can make the world a better place."

I hope that in this place and in Northern Ireland all communities will continue to channel that to deliver the bright future Northern Ireland deserves. I was so glad to hear from the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State about Lauren Bond, a Member of the Youth Parliament, who will continue the role of women in the contribution to peace in Northern Ireland in the future.

3.38 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). I would like to read out something that Mo Mowlam said about another civic group that was instrumental in the peace process, the Quakers. In a speech at Friends House in London in 2002, she said:

"They did an incredible amount in a house where everyone knew they could be trusted. I wouldn't have been able to talk to such a cross-section of people except for being able to meet in that house. They told me who to listen to. Without them my life would have been much tougher than it was."

We have heard so many contributions today from Members across the House. Success has many fathers, but I think we all remember where we were at that moment in history: the Good Friday agreement in 1998. That was the period when I joined the Labour party, because it was a very exciting time for us on the progressive side of politics. It was a time of great hope, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) said. We all remember that sense, as the weather warmed up and the spring came, of moving towards something positive. After that came the decommissioning process—it was exciting to see strong men handing in weapons—followed by the investment in public services, the good-quality policing and then the private investment coming in.

As many hon. Members have mentioned, we know that there is also a certain fragility, so it is quite pleasing that this debate comes just one week after we walked through the Division Lobby to support the Windsor framework. It also comes just before the April anniversary and the visit by President Biden, which will perhaps echo the phone calls that President Clinton made to encourage the parties and recall that momentous occasion.

Senator Mitchell, whom my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central mentioned, said:

"I believe there's no such thing as a conflict that can't be ended. They're created and sustained by human beings. They can be ended by human beings. No matter how ancient the conflict, no matter how hateful, no matter how hurtful, peace can prevail."

It is down to the people of Northern Ireland that that has happened, so this is a very special anniversary. Those of us who watched the agreement happen and wanted it to happen hope that we also played a role.

I want to touch on a point that has been very present in today's debate, which is about process. There is a sense —as you will recognise, Mr Deputy Speaker, as a great supporter of the peace process in Cyprus—that it is never concluded. Hon. Members have spoken today of ongoing fears. The security threat assessment is "severe". The legacies remain. Certain individuals in a conflict situation will always be invested in non-peaceful survival. Some people will want to go back to the period of the troubles. We think of the tragic death of the journalist, Lyra: when such a young person is affected, it really brings it home that we are not there yet.

I want also to speak briefly about the local environment, having come through local government myself. I will not go through how many years I was in local government—it is not as many as for some colleagues—but we know the importance of the local. I was pleased in 2019 to be part of the decriminalisation of abortion for women in Northern Ireland, but I also recognise that that can only be truly meaningful in a public services context when legislators in Stormont make it a 100% reality. There is still so much work to be getting on with.

I commend the work of educationists to bring in a truly integrated education service. It will be in future generations that we see the fruits of the labour of this generation. I ask the Secretary of State to set out his views on whether a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which has been discussed over the years, will be taken forward in the near future. Does he think that there is a future for that idea? What is his personal assessment?

What is the Secretary of State's view on clashes on the European convention on human rights, given that that is a live debate in our own Chamber, and given that the convention is an integral part of the Good Friday agreement? I think that in both parts of Ireland, there is a sense that a modernisation is occurring, and I would say that some of that is due to the influence of friends in Europe. European friends have often asked me what is happening to people in Ireland, and much of their negotiation with the UK has been about their desire to see progress on securing the peace in the two bits of Ireland.

I hope that the Secretary of State will reflect on those questions. It is always good to have an anniversary, but it is also always good to be forward-looking and to issue challenges for progress towards a more peaceful and rights-based future for the people in the wonderful place that is Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I also welcome the comments of the Secretary of State, as well as those of the respective Front Benchers and the many other Members, from both traditions and from none, who have put their points so thoughtfully and succinctly.

I would hope that this House is united in wanting to protect the legacy of the Northern Ireland peace process. A return to sectarian violence is surely unthinkable, although I heed the warnings of the Secretary of State and others that we ought not to take peace for granted. We should not be complacent. I hope we can recommit ourselves to ensuring that the institutions established under the Good Friday agreement are able to work, but to protect the legacy of the agreement we must ensure not only that the political institutions work, but that they uphold civil rights, justice and essential freedoms.

I will focus my remarks on the issues faced by journalists and the free press in Northern Ireland. Let me first refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and also mention that I am honoured to be the co-chair of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group. The NUJ represents journalists, photographers and other media professionals in both the UK and the Republic.

The democratic process in Northern Ireland, like that in all democratic nations, depends on the ability of local and national media to report what is going on in our communities. We have seen that recently following the BBC's threat to undermine Radio Foyle's much-loved breakfast show—an issue that has been raised in previous debates by the hon. Members for North Down (Stephen Farry) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The outcry from listeners led to journalists' balloting for strike action. That strength of feeling, along with the local connection, is a particular feature of local radio, which makes it one of our most trusted news sources.

I was interested by what the Secretary of State said about the discussion he had with John Major. John Major had, I think, suggested that if social media had existed 25 years ago, the Good Friday agreement might not have been possible. Honest, locally sourced and locally relevant news matters more than ever. While journalists everywhere are called on to report fairly, without fear or favour, to be a news journalist in Northern Ireland still requires real courage. That is an attribute

[Grahame Morris]

that several Members have referred to, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). Every journalist who does this work deserves the admiration of the House.

The Good Friday agreement has not stopped the continued violence or serious threats that journalists sadly experience for simply doing their jobs. Often, the threats come from paramilitaries or associated criminal gangs. One of the most egregious examples was the killing of *Sunday World* journalist Martin O'Hagan, who was shot and murdered in cold blood in 2001 while walking back from a night out in Lurgan with his wife, who sadly passed away just last year, some 21 years later, with the killers still not having been brought to justice. This is despite a former soldier—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I am terribly sorry to have to interrupt the hon. Gentleman. I am advised that this is the subject of an ongoing legal case and should not be referred to in the Chamber.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful for your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker. I did seek advice from the Speaker's Office in relation to the references that I was going to make, but I will adhere to your updated advice.

I am not going to comment on the case but, from speaking to BBC Northern Ireland's "Spotlight" programme, it is clear that there are indications that the police service has more than a good idea of those who are responsible. Despite more than two decades having elapsed, the family, friends and colleagues of Martin O'Hagan are still waiting and calling for justice to be served. In my view—and, I think, in the view of the majority of right hon. and hon. Members—we cannot allow journalists in Northern Ireland, or anywhere in our country, to be intimidated and murdered with impunity. To date, the British Government have sadly resisted calls from the National Union of Journalists and others to launch a fresh, independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the killing. I would like, respectfully, to reiterate that request to the Secretary of State today, because it is the only way that the disturbing questions raised by the case can be answered.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) referred to the case of Lyra McKee, who was shot dead in 2019 while reporting on the Creggan riots. Our thoughts and prayers remain with her partner, family and colleagues, who continue to mourn her loss. I will not mention the details of the case, because I understand that the sub judice rules preclude me from doing that, and as you rightly point out, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is an ongoing case and two individuals are currently on trial charged with murder. However, I think it will be in order if I quote the general secretary of the National Union of Journalists, Michelle Stanistreet, and join her in paying tribute to Lyra's life:

> "Whilst Lyra's life and career was cruelly cut short, her legacy lives on. Lyra's spirit and passion for journalism inspires our collective campaigning to thwart those who seek to undermine the vital function that journalism plays in our society, and through our commitment to ensure that journalists are able to go about their work safely, free from attack, intimidation and harassment."

The NUJ has welcomed the British Government's initiative in setting up the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which brings together representatives of the Government, journalism, policing, prosecution services and civil society to work in collaboration to ensure that journalists in the UK can operate free from threats and violence. However, we must also call out the intimidation of journalists by the state and the police. I am speaking here about the wrongful arrest of investigative journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey. Disappointingly, those arrests were carried out by officers from my force, Durham police. Trevor and Barry produced an award-winning documentary, "No Stone Unturned", about the Loughinisland massacre towards the end of the troubles. The two journalists brought a successful judicial review challenging the legality of the search warrants that were issued. This led to the Police Service of Northern Ireland deleting copies of the records obtained from their mobile phones and laptops, as well as to a substantial award in damages.

The police's investigation of Trevor and Barry was flawed. I recall meeting Trevor and Barry here in the Palace of Westminster. A photograph was taken of our meeting, which led to an unprofessional and abusive call to my constituency office by a senior Durham police officer involved in the investigation, who would go on to discredit himself further with emails attacking the courts and the Lord Chief Justice.

Finally, the journalist Patricia Devlin, who has written for the *Sunday World* and other publications, was subjected to a vile campaign of intimidation and abuse, including a social media message threatening her baby. Her name was later chillingly spray-painted on a wall, along with graffiti depicting the crosshairs of a gun target. Following a manifestly inadequate investigation, Patricia made a complaint to the police ombudsman, after which the PSNI reinvestigated the crime and tracked down the identity of the social media user responsible. However, the prosecuting authorities decided not to proceed to trial. Although I cannot make any inferences about the specific circumstances of this case, I express the concern of journalists, particularly those in Northern Ireland, and their trade union that there are far too many incidents in which the perpetrator is known to the authorities but, to protect undercover intelligence assets, victims are denied justice and protection.

I hope we can protect the legacy of the Good Friday agreement by recommitting ourselves to both its terms and its spirit. I ask the House and the Government to do everything possible to uphold the civil rights, justice and essential freedoms that all our communities deserve to enjoy.

3.57 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): It gives me great pleasure to wind up this debate for the official Opposition as a Labour MP, as we acknowledge the Belfast/Good Friday agreement—one of the greatest achievements of any Labour Government and perhaps one of the greatest achievements of any British Government during the second half of the 20th century.

Voices from both sides of the House have recognised the work of our predecessors. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), the shadow Secretary of State, said, this place must be a voice for all of Northern Ireland, which is why it is so important that all our voices have come together today.

As a female voice in the shadow Northern Ireland team, I associate myself with the eloquent remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist)

about the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and former Member for Redcar, Mo Mowlam. Whenever I have discussed the Belfast/Good Friday agreement on my visits to Northern Ireland, Mo's name has been quick to come up, and always in a positive light. Eighteen years since her passing, she continues to define Labour's commitment to the agreement and to Northern Ireland as a whole.

During my visits to Northern Ireland, I have met people who well remember the darkest days of the troubles, as well as the young adults and children who never had to live through them. I have spoken to people from both communities and all walks of life, but the common denominator is that none takes peace for granted. That is testament to the hard work and strength of everyone who played a role in securing the agreement, whether or not their signature is at the bottom of the page. The troubles may be in the past, but the significance of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement is still shaping lives today.

The hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, spoke about the "bravery" of politicians being needed today as much as it was 25 years ago. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) spoke about "persistence". Those two words have shone through today, as we have heard about the bravery and persistence of our leaders in the past and their brilliance in bringing together communities.

I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who highlighted the women of the peace process. It made me think back to the anniversary celebrations at Speaker's House, which many of us have spoken about today. The finest contribution of that evening, as we have all agreed—I know that the present company will not mind my saying this—came from its only female speaker, Lauren Bond, the Member of the Youth Parliament for North Antrim. She said she was shocked to find out during her school history lessons that women "didn't exist" until the 2000s. I hope that as we look to the next 25 years that can and will change.

Over the next 25 years, I hope we can change the narrative on Northern Ireland. Too often, it is seen as a place over the sea that we do not learn about or care about, but we should and we have to. The Belfast/Good Friday agreement provides so much that the rest of us can learn from, in how we got from the troubles to that historic day in 1998. Northern Ireland has so much to offer—what an absolutely brilliant place it is. It has the friendliest people I have met, present company excepted—*[Laughter.]* I have seen some of the most spectacular scenery there and heard some of the most fascinating and amazing stories there, as shadow Minister—I am not just talking about those from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his 39 years as an elected representative, as well as for his love of his wife, his family and his grandchildren, and of Dolly Parton!

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry), who has also been there to see at first hand the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. I pay tribute to his 30 years in politics. As he has said, it would be naive to pretend that there are not issues that still need addressing in Northern Ireland. As a result of some of today's contributions, I do not think any of us are under the illusion that this agreement fixed everything. However, the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was about more than just the issues that were there before 10 April 1998. The agreement looks to the future and legacy is a huge part of it. It was never there just to draw a line under years of fighting and forget about them. Those involved in securing it recognised that this would be an ongoing process.

An embodiment of that legacy aspect is shown in what I have seen in the integrated schools I have visited. Those establishments are enacting change just by existing. I made a recent visit to Oakgrove Integrated College, where I met the then acting principal, now principal, John Harkin. He is an incredible man, and the young people I met there were also incredible. They asked me to light the peace candle. When I did so, I spoke to him about the impact of the troubles outside Northern Ireland. I spoke about my constituent Robert Davies and the impact of his death; he was shot at Lichfield City station while he was training in the Army. Having those conversations and talking about the impact on the community of Pontarddulais, and on his parents, family and friends, was very important for me, as the local Member of Parliament, but it was also important for those at the college to hear about the family. So I welcome the commitment the Secretary of State made in his opening speech to invest in the expansion of integrated education, because I believe it is the way forward.

All of us here today, those of us who have a political connection to Northern Ireland, those who are from Northern Ireland or those who simply have a love for it, have a responsibility to keep the Belfast/Good Friday agreement moving forward. We need to support those who live with the trauma of their experiences of the troubles. We need to promote cross-community engagement. We need to ensure that the children of today and of the future know what it took to bring peace, and that they know that further progress and change are within their grasp. It is the Government's duty to invest in the young people, because they are the future of Northern Ireland.

I wish to end my contribution with a quote from Mo Mowlam's book, which has already been used by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). It is a quote that aptly sums up the peace process and one that we should also apply to our work today.

> "People working together can overcome many obstacles, often within themselves, and by doing so can make the world a better place."

4.5 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris: With the leave of the House, I will take this opportunity to say thank you to right hon. and hon. Members for their many and varied contributions to this debate. Indeed, I feel blessed to have listened to them. This House is at its best when it comes together in a spirit of bipartisanship, and, today, we have seen so much support, so many good speeches and so much experience—113 years' experience in three speakers alone. I wish to thank them all for their contributions.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, reminded us about the all-island nature of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. I can say to him that we do remain committed to that and to all its three strands. Indeed, one of the Prime Minister's first engagements as Prime Minister was in Blackpool at the

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

British Irish Council, which was established under the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. I think he was the first British Prime Minister to attend that summit for well over a decade to demonstrate how seriously this Government are taking all the institutions of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) reminded us how the Belfast/Good Friday agreement has been instructive and, to this day, continues to have value to those involved in peace processes across the globe. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave us the benefits of his experience—he might just have passed his apprenticeship. I thank him for his speech, its contents and the way that he delivered it. I know that we need to have a long conversation, but I am absolutely sure that we will get there in the end.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) spoke with true emotion and sincerity. I have learned many a lesson from him in my time in this place. Indeed, he was the speaker immediately after my maiden speech in this House, and I have always tried to take his advice from that speech—well, at least some of it. It was a pleasure to listen to him today. The elements of the lessons that he distilled about the step-by-step nature of peace and not giving up were unbelievably wise words.

The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) knows that we are involved in negotiations to get Stormont up and running, but I am not convinced that starving people in the last 24 hours of that is the right way forward this time. But he has experience of the negotiations, and he is a wise man; he knows what he is talking about. He, too, gave an excellent speech, and I will talk a bit about reform in a moment. The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) talked about the women, especially Mo Mowlam, behind the peace process. I thank her for her excellent speech and I am so glad that other Members also raised the women behind the agreement. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) mentioned that success has many fathers. I think the complete quote ends, "but failure is an orphan", although we should add to it that success, especially in this case, also has many mothers. It was good to be reminded of that in her speech.

The hon. Lady asked me a couple of questions, and I will certainly try to answer at least one of them. I completely understand that the ECHR is integral to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. The Prime Minister has said that we will honour the international obligations that we have made. I hope the hon. Lady and the House will see, as the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill travels through its remaining stages in the other place and when it gets here, that my overall aim is to ensure that that Bill, whose compliance with the ECHR is currently questionable, will be compliant. The proof will be in the pudding as those amendments come forward.

The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) brought a different angle to the debate. I know Northern Ireland is a very difficult place to operate as a journalist, but it has a brilliant tradition of journalism; some of the greatest have come from Northern Ireland and, indeed, I believe it has a vibrant journalistic democracy in itself. I welcome what he said about the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists and I understand the points that he made about the case.

I wish to say thank you in particular to the hon. Members for Hove (Peter Kyle) and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), not only for their thoughtful remarks about the agreement, the journey to it and the importance of protecting it and upholding it, but equally for their wise counsel and advice and the way that we can work across the Chamber. I hope we demonstrate that we do that, because we have the same ambition here: to honour this agreement, to mark it well and to ensure that we learn and move forward positively with it.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the agreement was unlocked through the achievement, bravery and dedication of a great many people over many years. We managed to name some of them, but there are many that we failed to name. I would like to think that over the course of the next few weeks, as we go to many different occasions to mark 10 April 1998, they will all get a mention—or at least that we can bow our heads in deference to those who travelled that journey to get to peace and sign that agreement.

The hon. Member for North Down talked about the need for reform of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and some of its institutions. I can quite understand where he is coming from, and why voices in Northern Ireland and his party are reflecting on the current institutional arrangements and how they work, but he will forgive me if my primary focus at this time is the restoration of those institutions.

The hon. Gentleman knows that I believe the Windsor framework delivers stability for the people of Northern Ireland, protects Northern Ireland's place in the Union and preserves the balance in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It also provides the Northern Ireland Assembly with a powerful say. It is now up to the parties in Northern Ireland to decide how they want to move forward together to create a better future for the nation. The Government remain open to hearing reform proposals that are consistent with the core principles in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and command support across the communities.

The hon. Member for Strangford would expect me to say this, but he raised some points relating to Northern Ireland's place in the Union, and I am very clear that the United Kingdom Government are proud of Northern Ireland and its place in our Union, and we will do all we can to support it. Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK as long as its people wish it to be, on the basis of the principle of consent, which he quite rightly highlighted in his speech.

I am delighted that we all, right hon. and hon. Members of this House, have had the opportunity today to share reflections on and recollections of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, so close to its 25th anniversary on 10 April. This is a truly historic moment in Northern Ireland's story. It is not hyperbole to say that the Belfast/Good Friday agreement has had a transformational impact on Northern Ireland, ending 30 years of armed conflict, ushering in an era of stability and prosperity, supporting progress towards reconciliation and so much more.

As we look forward to the coming 25 years, the UK Government are committed to the agreement in all respects, to marking this anniversary sensitively and to ensuring that Northern Ireland benefits from an even more prosperous and more reconciled future. I know that ambition is shared by all sides of the House, as we have seen very clearly in this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 25th anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

Cerebral Palsy: Adult Care Transition

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

4.15 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): It is a pleasure to have the chance to participate in a debate on cerebral palsy. I tend to be quite sparing in the opportunities I take to discuss this matter in this Chamber. I restrict myself to one opportunity per Parliament, so this is my effort for this particular part of the decade. So many and varied are the issues that could be covered that I could hold a debate on cerebral palsy every week of the year.

Cerebral palsy is one of the least well-understood conditions around—the incidence among the general population is the same as for Parkinson's or motor neurone disease—and I think that it is partly because of that, and partly because of its broad spectrum of impairment, that it does not have the same profile in the public consciousness. Nor did it have, until recently, a condition-specific charity. Now, at least, I can thank Action Cerebral Palsy and the Adult Cerebral Palsy Hub for their actions and support for the all-party parliamentary group on cerebral palsy, which I chair, as well as the Cauldwell Children charity, which not only sponsors our APPG but, perhaps more importantly, supports tens of thousands of families up and down the country whose children often have quite complex special educational needs.

In this place, we often discuss issues around the transition from childhood into adulthood, so the Government recognise what a crucial stage that is in someone's personal development. We consider it with regard to care leavers, for whom support has been extended to the age of 25, as well as to the introduction of education, health and care plans, which have also been extended to the age of 25. I think that we need to apply the same philosophy to cerebral palsy.

I mentioned earlier the broad spectrum of impairment, which is, I think, part of the problem in the way in which both Government and society as a whole deal with the condition. Eighty per cent. of those with cerebral palsy have some form of spastic motor impairment, but that is so broad that it ranges from the likes of me, who can function fine 98% or 99% of the time, to those with dyskinetic forms such as the twisting and repetitive movements known as dystonia, the slower movements known as athetosis, and irregular, unpredictable movements known as chorea, so planning for the inclusion of those with cerebral palsy in the adult world has to be, by definition, an individualised process.

The existing legislative framework is disconnected and fragmentary, and does not account for cerebral palsy as a condition in its own right. Indeed, all too often, I feel that it is bedevilled by ignorance on the part even of medical experts at times, and by a lack of common sense from providers. As those of us with cerebral palsy leave full-time education, we encounter a much less structured world where preconceptions about our abilities seem to be so much greater and, invariably, utterly misguided.

People watching the debate on their TVs will assume that I am drunk. That always happens; every time I stand up in this place and appear on TV, I get an email

[Paul Maynard]

saying, "Why were you drunk when you appeared in the Chamber?" I personally find that quite ironic because I am actually allergic to alcohol as it is a trigger for my epilepsy. It is perhaps a good thing to have a Member of Parliament who is allergic to alcohol and can always speak and, indeed, vote with a clear mind—if only we could all manage that. Preconceptions about cerebral palsy are rife, day in, day out. I stress once again for the record that cerebral palsy is not an intellectual disability—it never has been; it never will be.

Help and advice for individuals during their transition into adulthood are all too scarce. During the course of the APPG's inquiry into this issue, I have been consistently struck and, indeed, depressed by how policy and practice, as well as day-to-day experience, have not moved on since my own passage through education and early adult life. Indeed, the online community Cerebral Palsy Adult Advice UK made the following submission to the APPG's inquiry:

> "We have been totally overwhelmed by the number of adults joining our group looking for help because they have no idea where to start… we have been inundated by members seeking help—help that we are not equipped to direct them to, because it simply doesn't exist."

One young person with CP told us:

> "I have to be the educator and adviser—there is still too much ignorance at every turn and an immediate assumption of my mental incapacity".

This all leads to thwarted ambitions. The all-too-human desire to make the best of ourselves can be very hard to fulfil, given the hurdles that so many with CP face. People often ask me how I feel about what I must be missing out on in life. I get that question so often, and it really angers me. How could I have any conception of what I am missing out on? This is my lived reality day in, day out; I do not know any different. I do not feel I am missing out. I do not feel that there is any detriment to my life experience, but people always make that assumption.

There has to be a fundamental re-design of the services, rights and processes involved in the transition to adulthood. The consequence of not doing so is a failing at both an individual and systemic level of what is needed to support, equip and prepare young people with cerebral palsy as they move into adulthood and a lack of understanding of the day-to-day challenges that they will experience. Every young person with cerebral palsy must have in place a road map for their transition to adulthood that includes their education, health and care needs.

Like any good APPG report, mine has come up with a 10-point plan—I often wish we had 11 points or nine, just for a bit of variety, but there we are. As we have a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), here today, I will restrict myself to the health points. I recognise that a special educational needs and disabilities review is under way, which will consider the other points that I will not raise today.

The APPG recommends that each child and young person with cerebral palsy and their family must have a dedicated lead professional to act as an advocate, co-ordinator and support from the point of diagnosis through to the completion of their transition to adulthood. Each integrated care system must enhance the empowerment of young people living with CP by creating dedicated budgets for the individual to access the necessary resources and services from the public, independent and voluntary sectors to prevent the deterioration of their health and wellbeing in adulthood.

Every integrated care system in England should create new regional hubs of specialisms for those living with CP hosting multidisciplinary teams, bringing together experts from the public, independent and voluntary sectors. These hubs would have a specific focus on upskilling, training and recruiting specialist therapists and clinical practitioners.

The Government should make available investment in high-quality healthcare, therapy and education to unleash the potential of young people with CP, which, in turn, will reduce future costs in adulthood incurred by those living with the condition.

Dedicated healthcare transition care pathways for young people with cerebral palsy, alongside a dedicated adult service for the condition, should be in place in all nations of the UK. I have always been struck that I had no medical follow-up after the age of about 13, with no more physio and no intervention, yet that was the point at which my body was growing the fastest and my muscles and limbs were outgrowing the ability of my brain to develop them properly. Right when I needed it most, I had the least intervention of all. I only began returning to a proper form of physio three years ago, which has made an immense difference, not necessarily visibly but to my core body strength and my ability to do things that we need to do in daily life. That is why it is really important that we do a much better job at identifying people with CP, to monitor their development throughout their lives. I welcome the fact that the cerebral palsy integrated pathway is being upscaled to create cerebral palsy registers in every part of the UK. That has to be a good thing, but we must build on it and utilise that information now that it is being collected.

An estimated one in four children and young people with cerebral palsy will be non-verbal and require the use of assistive technology and alternative and augmentative communication strategies throughout their life. Preliminary research findings from Ireland have found that, while assistive technology—or ATech, as it is called—is valued, it also carries a "challenging and lengthy" funding process and high rates of abandonment without proper assessment or training. This is an issue that I have done a great deal of work on with Ministers during my time in this place, and I recognise that ATech is something that is now really embedded in the Government's approach. I welcome the work done in the UK by bodies such as the Ace Centre to make us a world leader when it comes to ATech; I am pleased to also chair that APPG, but I will save that for what I suspect will be a future Adjournment debate. I am grateful to the disability Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), for his engagement and support and for recognising the role ATech can play in the workplace.

All the strategies I have outlined are lifelines for young people with cerebral palsy who have challenges with motor function and verbal communication. Effective and timely access to appropriate equipment and training in the use of technology, which should start in infancy for all those who will require it, will enable the young

person to engage fully within their social environment, home and school or further education community, and in the workplace. Families with young people with cerebral palsy have given testimonials to the APPG that they require expertise and support from professionals who understand how the interrelated comorbidities of cerebral palsy impact on each area of their son or daughter's life. Parents have described the sense of exhaustion that they are driven to by having to explain their child's condition to multiple agencies over and over again, and facing long delays for decisions to be taken and funding agreed on.

The most common proposed solution from parents and carers of young people with cerebral palsy is the creation of one-stop-shop regional centres, bringing together expert professionals: doctors, therapists, orthotists and dieticians, dentists, nurses, educationalists, and indeed anyone we can think of to collaborate and meet the holistic needs of the individual with cerebral palsy. For example, changes or deterioration in tone and postural stability related to growth may result in orthopaedic issues. Those may in turn lead to a need for changes in seating, wheelchairs and hoists, which may in turn affect access to augmentative and alternative communication or AT devices.

In its submission to the APPG, University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust called for inequalities in health services for those living with cerebral palsy throughout the UK to be addressed by making it a statutory obligation for each integrated care board to provide a multidisciplinary service for people with cerebral palsy living in their area. I concur with that suggestion—indeed, I desperately await being drawn out of the hat for a private Member's Bill one year, which I will use to put that suggestion forward as a Bill, because it sounds like just the sort of thing that would have a chance at going through. In the meantime, policymakers must put in place urgent and ongoing measurements of the capacity of local areas and integrated care boards to deliver the level of support that young people with complex cerebral palsy within their areas require, including appropriate access to doctors, healthcare and therapists.

I recognise that I have read out a very long shopping list today, but that is partly because we are starting from a much lower point than so many other conditions. Therefore, perhaps predictably in an Adjournment debate, I ask the Minister to please meet me and Action Cerebral Palsy to discuss all those issues—and more, I have no doubt. Cerebral palsy should not be seen as a condition where the prognosis is gloomy and the existence is depressing, but rather as a condition, however severe, where the individual living with it can, with help, live a productive and fulfilling life. That is what we anticipate and aim for for all our children; it should be no different for those children living with cerebral palsy. I thank the Minister for listening today, and look forward to hearing her response.

4.28 pm

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) for his speech this afternoon. We all draw on our own experiences in this House, and rightly so—in fact, I believe that this House is all the better for its diversity, whatever form that is in—but drawing on experience takes courage, as does doing a job in the public eye. My hon. Friend demonstrated his double courage this afternoon by telling us, as he has told me before, how he has—among other things—been mocked for his own cerebral palsy and asked, for instance, "Why are you drunk?" when he is allergic to alcohol. As I think he suggested, the Whips might wish that more of us were in that boat and always clear-minded when voting, although maybe not. I thank him very much for facing down the mockery that he might sometimes experience. It is completely wrong that he faces that, and I have huge respect for what he does in standing up to that—I wish that he did not have to. I thank him, because I see what he does in his work for his constituents and in the many areas of interest that he campaigns on. Specifically today, he has drawn on his personal experience in his once-a-Parliament speech on cerebral palsy.

I also praise and thank the APPG on cerebral palsy for its excellent report, which includes a clear set of 10 recommendations for us in Health and for other Departments, including the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, on the transition from childhood to adulthood for young people with cerebral palsy. A number of the recommendations that my hon. Friend referred to are specifically relevant to health, including the importance of having a roadmap for young people with cerebral palsy; the need for a dedicated lead professional looking out for them; the importance of empowering young people and their families to become self-advocates for what they need; the call for dedicated budgets; the call for regional hubs in integrated care systems bringing together multi-disciplinary teams of professionals; and the need for healthcare transition pathways and for upscaling cerebral palsy registers. Those are the ones that sprung out to me from that list. On some of those I can assure him we are making good progress; for others, the best thing I can do is take them away and make sure I get him a fuller response than I am able to give today.

My hon. Friend and the report argue compellingly for further action and focus on supporting young people with cerebral palsy on their transition from childhood into adulthood. I say that because we know that that transition can be very challenging for those of 100% fitness. The transition from childhood into adulthood is a mixture of exciting and daunting. The extent to which it may be exciting or daunting very much depends on someone's circumstances, but it can be particularly daunting if they have disabilities. As my hon. Friend said, one of the challenges with cerebral palsy is the extent to which it is understood, including among experts, and the huge range of impairments that people might experience. Some can live their life completely to the full, as he demonstrates, and others face far greater challenges in their lives. In those circumstances, it is all the more important for us to make sure that, across all public services that are there to support us through our lives, there is the right support for that crucial transition from young person support into adult services, so that somebody with cerebral palsy, whatever the level of impairment of what they can do their lives, can truly fulfil their potential and lead a full and satisfying life.

I will touch on a couple of things that are specific to the healthcare side of the support for people with cerebral palsy. As I am sure my hon. Friend will know, there is National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance on the transition from child to adult services and specific guidance for young people with cerebral palsy. The NICE recommendations include developing

[Helen Whately]

clear pathways for transition and providing a named support worker for individuals. Those two things align closely with some of the recommendations in his report.

However, an obvious question follows the fact there is NICE guidance, which is, as my hon. Friend might well ask, "Is it being implemented, and to what extent? Where have these recommendations been followed?" I, too, want to know the answer to that and to be able to give it to him. I was not able to get that answer before I came to the Dispatch Box. I am therefore seeking an answer from NHS England, and I will write to him as soon as I have it. That answer will tell him the extent to which those recommendations have been followed and are in place. I anticipate that we may see variation around the country. Where we have variation, the important thing is to know where practice is good, and recognise that, but, where there is a gap in services or provision, to ensure that that is also known about and to step in.

The NHS long-term plan, published in 2019, recognised the problem of transition from children's to adult services. That plan set out the aim of moving towards

"service models for young people that offer person-centred and age appropriate care for mental and physical health needs, rather than an arbitrary transition to adult services based on age not need."

NHS England has updated me on this work. It has assured my Department that it is working to ensure that no child or young person will be lost in the gaps between children's and adult services. Its children and young people transformation programme is developing resources to this end, including guidance that supports the design of transition pathways.

Again, we hear that NHS England appreciates the problems and is working to improve the transition, given the risk of there being gaps between children's and adult services, and that further guidance is being developed. We are talking about transition pathways, but, again, it would be perfectly reasonable for my hon. Friend to ask where that has got to: where is that guidance, and to what extent is it being followed in practice? On that, again, I will write to him to give him a full answer, because as far as I am concerned it is no good that we should say there is guidance and recommendations. What is also—in fact, even more—important is what is happening in practice.

Specifically, one of the things in the APPG's report was about personal health budgets and the need for people to have their own dedicated budget. On that, I believe we are making good progress. This applies not just to people with cerebral palsy, but to those with other health conditions. Across the country, there is access to personal health budgets and, more broadly, to personalised care approaches, which is an important way of giving people choice and control over their care.

I have spoken directly to people who have told me what a difference having a personal health budget is making to their lives. We are on target to reach our commitment of 200,000 personal health budgets by March 2024. That said, I have no doubt that we have further to go, as we work towards that target and beyond, in making sure that everybody who could benefit from having a personal health budget does indeed have one. Again, I know there is variation across the country on the extent to which people have them. Where there may be bureaucratic barriers to people having a personal health budget, that is something we should continue to look into, because they can make such a difference to people being able to get the care that they feel they personally need.

Talking about the importance of knowing who has cerebral palsy and knowing who needs that support, my hon. Friend mentioned how he did not receive any follow-up care after he was 13-years-old until very recently. He said how valuable that has been, but there was clearly a great big gap when he might have benefited. As he mentioned, we have the cerebral palsy integrated pathway database, which since 2019 has been supporting the development and extension of registers across all regions in England. That database is included in the NHS England plans for ongoing central funding of clinical databases. It is therefore important that we continue to build up the records, particularly of young people with cerebral palsy, and make the most of that database; as my hon. Friend said, we must not only have the database but make use of the data in it, because when we know who has cerebral palsy we can make sure they get the support they need. I am going to look into that to make sure we follow through on our aspirations.

I will take away the other points in the clear list of recommendations relating to health in the all-party group's report and the areas I have covered in terms of the long-term plan and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance, and will get back to my hon. Friend with more details on the progress being made. The all-party group report is clear and compelling, and it deserves a full response on the actions being taken against the recommendations and the commitments already made to improve the transition for people with cerebral palsy and other health conditions as they transfer from childhood into adulthood. I want to express my gratitude to all involved in the work of the all-party group, and I specifically want to thank charities, including Action Cerebral Palsy, that work tirelessly to support and advocate for those living with cerebral palsy.

I want us to make sure the transition from childhood to adulthood is exciting for those living with cerebral palsy, rather than daunting. I do not want health conditions and disabilities to hold anyone back. I want to make sure the right health, educational and professional support is available to unlock the abilities of everyone so they can lead a fulfilling life to the full.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, for making his compelling arguments, and for bringing his own experience so powerfully into this Chamber to motivate all those listening, including me at the Dispatch Box, to do more and do better. I will of course be delighted to meet him, as he asked, to talk about this further. By the time we meet, I look forward to being able to give him more comprehensive responses to the excellent points he raised.

Question put and agreed to.

4.41 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 30 March 2023

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Christianity in Society

1.30 pm

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

That this House has considered Christianity in society.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell.

The Church and Christianity, and the interpretation of the Bible, have been in the news more than normal as of late. Recently, the census showed that fewer people identify as Christian. The Church of England has been debating well-known ethical teaching that is now considered controversial in a liberal, modern United Kingdom. Many institutions seem to want to erase any references to their Christian heritage. The London School of Economics recently stated that it would be dropping Easter, Christmas and Michaelmas from its academic calendar. This Easter, the giant bunny will no doubt return to my Westminster hotel lobby, but I am sure there will be no sign of a cross.

In conversations everywhere, the Lord's name is taken in vain and no one bats an eyelid. Rainbows were long understood to represent God's promise to never again flood the Earth, but I wonder how many people are even aware of that now. Religious literacy has been declining for decades. Every Christmas and Easter, the newspapers will report some new poll showing that fewer and fewer people understand even the most basic claims of the Christian faith, and the basic historical and legal facts about our Christian heritage and constitution are receding from our collective cultural understanding. The question is, does it matter? I want to suggest two reasons why it does: first, for constitutional and cultural reasons; and secondly, from a faith point of view.

Throughout British history, the Christian Church has pioneered some of the most profound and positive social changes ever to bless these islands. Here, as in many other parts of the world, Christians led the way with universal education and healthcare. As the historian Tom Holland and many others have recognised, so many of the laws and values that we now take for granted have their roots firmly in the Christian faith. It was the biblical idea of God as the ultimate law giver that underpinned the Magna Carta, providing the foundation stone of individual freedom and establishing the principle that no one—not even the King—is above the law.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I commend him for bringing this subject to the House, especially at Easter time. He speaks of our Christian heritage. We stand here in the House of Commons, where, for many of us, William Wilberforce is the most esteemed parliamentarian to have graced these Benches. Does my hon. Friend agree that it was Wilberforce's Christian faith that motivated him to battle for years—even decades—to challenge the heinous industry of individual slavery and to see the abolition of that trade in his generation?

Nick Fletcher: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution and for her continued support; I was actually going to mention William Wilberforce in my next sentence.

It was the Christian faith that moved John Locke to develop our understanding of religious toleration. It was the Christian faith that compelled William Wilberforce, who my hon. Friend has just mentioned, to fight the slave trade, set up homes for the elderly and establish the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It was the Christian faith that moved Lord Shaftesbury to campaign for better working conditions and provisions for the mentally ill. It was Christianity that inspired Hannah More to set up free schools for the poor. Again, it was Christianity that prompted Josiah Wedgwood to revolutionise working conditions in his factories. It was the Christian faith that led Elizabeth Fry to campaign for prison reform.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member for bringing this debate to the House. There is no doubt that it was people motivated by Christian beliefs who achieved all those social advances. It was also people who claimed to be Christians who introduced all those evils into the United Kingdom's society in the first place.

Nick Fletcher: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. Obviously, lots of people throughout the entirety of history may not have used their faith or interpretation of the Bible in the way that I and many Christians today believe they should have. However, the list of people I just read out did some wonderful things.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is to be commended for bringing forward this debate, and I support everything he says. This building, the bastion of democracy, is full of Christian iconography, particularly at the other end near the House of Lords—perhaps they are closer to God than we are.

I want to ask my hon. Friend one question. There will inevitably be pressure for us to disestablish the Church of England. I am not an Anglican, but the fact that we have an established Church is an important symbol of our commitment to Christianity. Will my hon. Friend say a word about the importance of keeping the established Church established?

Nick Fletcher: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution. As my speech goes on, I will of course make that point.

Many of our laws are based around the tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai and the ethical teaching of the Old and New Testaments. The great biblical institution of marriage is recognised by social science for the emotional and material blessing it brings to spouses and their children. The Christian faith is woven into the social and physical fabric of the United Kingdom. The beautiful and symbolic church buildings across this land, with their tall steeples reaching for the heavens, are part of our history and culture, not just our skyline.

[Nick Fletcher]

The place in which we stand took its name from the noble abbey church of St Peter's—the minster in the west. The bishops play their part in the House of Lords, reflecting hundreds of years of having an established Church. Prayers are said every day in the Chambers of both Houses. Above each entrance to Central Lobby, the patron saints from all four parts of our United Kingdom are celebrated in murals. The tiled floor contains the words of psalm 127:

"Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain."

At the coronation, His Majesty the King will be anointed in the name of God as Supreme Governor of the Church of England, as well as Head of State. St Edward's crown, which will be placed on his head, contains a cross and orb symbolising the King and our world under the authority of God. Many people who do not have a personal faith in Christ still value this history and the benefits it has given us.

Of course, some want to rewrite history, but everywhere we look we see our Christian heritage, and nowhere more than in this place. It matters to our national life; it is the air we breathe. Although many deride and misrepresent it, the reality is that it has been a source of great benefit. Much of what makes Britain great stems from that heritage, and many others from around the world recognise that. Why do we not? We should be proud of our Christian history and values. It would be a constitutional disaster to try to erase it—even worse, it would be a spiritual disaster.

That brings me to the main reason why we should cherish the Christian faith, because I, like many others, believe it is true. Let me speak of the basics of Christianity. The foundational premise of the gospel is that we are all sinners. We do wrong: wrong against God and wrong against one another, and we know it—I know it. I am not proud of it, but it is true. If we were all really truthful with ourselves, we would all admit that we are not the good people we like to think we are. We might not all be out stealing and assaulting people; however, I am sure we have all said things that we wish we had not said and done things we wish we had not done. We have been unkind instead of kind and greedy instead of generous. We have broken promises instead of keeping them. We have told lies instead of telling the truth. We have done the things as parents or partners that we know we should not have.

People in the Old Testament covered their sins with sacrifices—their prized lamb or goat sacrificed to God. However, God knew we would never be able to meet his hopes for our lives, which is why the events of Easter happened. John 3:16, probably the most famous verse in the Bible, says:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his…only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

At Christmas, we celebrate Christ's birth. He came into the world as a unique person—one who was fully human like us, but also divine and therefore perfect and sinless. On Good Friday, we remember the cross where Jesus was sacrificed to cover our sins. On Easter Sunday, we celebrate the fact that he rose from the dead to sit at the right-hand side of God, defeating death for the sake of everyone who believes in him. The Christians who have had such a great influence on the life of this nation knew those things to be true because they are written in the pages of the world's best-selling book, the Holy Bible. Those of us who believe in that book might not perfectly understand it—sadly, we might even sometimes misuse it—but it is still true and still perfect, and with the help of God's Holy Spirit, anyone can understand it.

Christianity is not a religion only open to clever people. In fact, one reason why the Christian faith is sometimes derided and rejected is that it is disproportionately a religion for the kind of people that elites look down on—the poor, the weak, the uneducated. But as the Bible itself says, God uses the weak "to shame the strong". The Bible is a book of truth, love and grace—a book written by God through his chosen people; a book that gives someone like me the promise of eternal life and wise guidance about how to be a better person.

I became a Christian in my mid-30s. I knew of Christ many years before, but never thought I was good enough, and I was right—I wasn't. The Bible is shockingly plain that we cannot make ourselves good enough for God, no matter how many good deeds we try to do. But that is the beauty of Christianity and the Easter story. Forgiveness is given to us by God, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This good news is offered to everyone, everywhere. All our sins past and present are forgiven once we make that decision.

It is a wonderful feeling to be forgiven, blessed and certain of the promise of eternal life. It is wonderful knowing that my maker is with me at all times, right here, right now. He is with me in my triumphs—there have been a few—but, more importantly, in the dark times too. I could not do this job without my faith. I would have had some lonely walks over Westminster bridge to my hotel after a long and difficult day without God at my side.

I am not sure how this speech will be received. Some people are very hostile to the idea of Christian politicians, so let me try to reassure them. The two greatest instructions are taught in Luke 10:27. Jesus said:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself."

He said that my neighbour is everyone in here, from all parties, and everyone out there too. That does not mean that I have to agree with them—thank goodness for that—but it does mean that I must love them.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend says that he is not sure how his speech will be received. I have been in this House for about 13 years and I have never been more moved when listening to a speech. He echoes so much of my own experience. I became a Christian when I was 27, and it changed my life. It gave my life meaning and purpose. As he says, it is wonderful to know that we are so loved by someone who was willing even to send his son to die on a cross, and would have done so had we been the only person in the world.

I want to put on the record my appreciation of my hon. Friend's bravery in speaking so boldly and clearly about his faith. I believe it echoes the faith of many others in this place and across this country. It humbles me to consider that perhaps over 13 years I should have been bolder and braver, but I thank him for what he has done and said today.

Nick Fletcher: My hon. Friend is one of the boldest and bravest people I know here. I thank her very much.

Sir Edward Leigh: I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) is making a very moving and beautifully written speech, which we never normally hear in this place. I think that a lot of politicians who may have religious belief are frightened of talking about it because they think that they will put themselves on a pedestal and that, when inevitably they fail—or, if the worst comes to the worst, there is some scandal—they will be doubly denounced. However, I am not sure that that is a good reason for not talking up about one's faith. In talking about his faith, my hon. Friend admits that he constantly fails—that he is a sinner and all those sorts of things—so, even if he does fail in the future, that is absolutely no reason for not talking about his faith publicly.

Nick Fletcher: I thank my right hon. Friend. I have known about Christianity all my life—I was brought up in a Christian home—but I did not want to make the commitment, because I never thought that I was good enough. I thought that the mistakes I made would be too many and that a Christian person should be this wonderful person with a halo. As one learns about the Bible, one realises that that is not true. It is because I make mistakes that I became a Christian.

I hope that I have not offended anybody. I hope that I have given a true account of the need for Christianity as a nation and as individuals. The west as a whole is under threat from many foreign aggressors, and many a commentator is saying that the west is under threat from itself. Whether we see Christianity as part of our history, or whether we embrace it as our own personal faith, it matters to all of us. Whether or not we are believers, our way of life is built on Christianity, and I believe that to let it fall by the wayside, thinking that it does not matter, would be a terrible mistake.

I thank hon. Members for listening. I hope that some of those watching and listening have learned something new about the great history of our nation, but most of all I hope that they have heard the Christian message of faith, hope and love, and that some of them might start on the same wondrous journey as I did, with God at their side. I look forward to hearing colleagues' thoughts.

1.47 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for my late arrival; I was delayed in the Chamber. I congratulate him on securing a debate on this subject, which is extremely important and too often neglected. His efforts to highlight the value to our society of faith, and Christian faith in particular, are to be commended.

It can often seem that the Christian faith is in retreat, and certainly recent statistics about church attendance seem to support that, but that is nothing new for the Christian Church. Particularly concerning is the lack of knowledge about the Christian faith, which was in part why, along with my hon. Friend, I recently held a debate in this Chamber about religious education. I hope that the House will allow me to reflect on my upbringing.

Being a child of the 1950s, like many I attended Sunday school. Thinking back to my school days at Welholme Junior School in Grimsby, I would say that around half our class, which at that time had about 35 pupils, regularly attended Sunday school—many of them at my church, All Saints' in Grimsby, or the neighbouring Methodist church, which at that time had a thriving congregation. At Sunday school, we were of course introduced to the basic tenets of the faith. Importantly, that continued with daily assemblies at school, and I still recall some of the prayers used by my headteacher at Welholme and, later, at Havelock School in Grimsby.

Sadly, too many schools these days neglect the religious aspect of education. Of course, the approach taken by schools, and indeed by our churches, has had to evolve, but I wonder how many headteachers take the approach of the head at my daughter's school. I recall attending a parents evening in what would have been the mid-1990s where, when questioned about religious education, he said that he did not regard the school's role as to indoctrinate children, but to bring them to the threshold of faith—if only that were the case today.

Without knowledge of the Christian faith—a faith whose teachings form the basis of our laws and so many other foundations of our society—it is not possible to appreciate our history, culture and so much more. It is part of the glue that holds our society together. So many of our schools have their roots in the churches that established schools and charitable institutions.

I am a worshipping member of the Church of England. Like many in its congregation up and down the country, I am often frustrated and feel that it has lost its way. Of course, it should do good works—supporting schools and so on, as I mentioned—but I sometimes think that it is neglecting what must surely be its core job: spreading the gospel. It needs to kick into touch the endless, tortuous debates about sexuality and comments on the minutiae of Government policy and start getting people into its churches to hear a clear Christian message.

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely agree that the core message of the Church has to be sharing the gospel of Christ and the good news, as we have heard today. Does my hon. Friend agree that many Christians across the country are worried about sharing their faith and even publicly quoting from the Bible because of what the law says? In fact, by law, religion or belief is a protected characteristic, as acknowledged by the Equality Act 2010. An expression of faith should not be given any less respect than any other protected characteristic. There is not a hierarchy, but does my hon. Friend agree that that is often how Christians feel? Christians are not asking for any special privilege when expressing their faith—they are just asking not to be at a disadvantage when they express their views and beliefs compared with other groups in society.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I entirely agree. There is a reluctance among the public to be open about their faith because they genuinely fear potential repercussions.

Sir Edward Leigh: My hon. Friend was talking about the way that Church leaders speak up. I remember asking for a meeting of MPs with the Bishop of Lincoln, and at the top of a long list of subjects he wanted to talk to us about was the widening of the A15. I just wonder whether our Churches—whether we are talking about Catholics or bishops—should concentrate more

[Sir Edward Leigh]

on talking about spirituality. Although Christians might be in a minority in this country, people of faith are still in a very big majority—that includes Muslims, Hindus and many others. Does my hon. Friend agree that we want to hear more from our bishops about the deep value and well of spirituality, in addition to all the good causes they talk about, which are perfectly valuable in themselves?

Martin Vickers: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. I can recall many of those meetings from when I acted as his constituency agent in years gone by, and it would have been rather nice had they concentrated on spiritual matters. Having said that, I believe that, on the whole, the Church of England does speak for the decent silent majority who recognise that the Church plays an important part in society and, although they may not attend church regularly, like to think that it is there.

I am reading a book called "God in Number 10"; other Members may have obtained a copy when it was launched here in the House a few months ago. Its author is Mark Vickers—I emphasise that he is, to the best of my knowledge, no relation.

Sir Edward Leigh: But he is also from Lincolnshire.

Martin Vickers: Yes, indeed. In the section on Stanley Baldwin, I was struck by a reference that he made. The former Prime Minister reportedly said to King George VI that the average working man—I am sure he would say woman, as well, if he were alive today—might not go to church him or herself, but was glad to know that his monarch did. I suggest to colleagues that the average working man and woman probably think the same about their Member of Parliament. We should not be afraid to "do God", as Alastair Campbell didn't say. I certainly get more criticism for being a Conservative than for being a Christian.

Incidentally, another extract from the book refers to a comment by Charles Gore, who was Bishop of Oxford between 1911 and 1919. Apparently, he said in a letter to *The Times* that he doubted that

"the cohesion of the Church of England was ever more seriously threatened than it is now."

Well, he could have said that yesterday, rather than a century ago.

We are blessed in this country in that we can—despite the thoughts of some keyboard warriors and others—practise our faith in safety, with few exceptions. As we know, that is not the case in many parts of the world. I praise the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) in her role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. We should welcome the fact that the Prime Minister, and indeed his predecessor, made such an appointment. I also commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for all his work with his all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief.

Faith plays an important part in the lives of billions of people across the globe, and we must do all we can to ensure that they can practise their faith in safety. Here in the UK, I sincerely hope that the Christian faith lasts for very many more centuries to come.

1.56 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell, and thank you for getting me in at the last moment. I also thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for bringing forward this debate.

Today's debate is timely, given the approach of Easter. We are also now in the holy month of Ramadan, and Passover and Vaisakhi will soon be upon us as well. I declare an interest as somebody who was brought up in the Church of England, although I was told off by a local vicar last year for not attending regularly. He has a good memory, because I think the last time I went was some years ago.

I pay tribute to the role of churches in my community, and it is timely to reflect on the wider values of faith communities in British history. Certainly in Reading, and in Woodley, which is the other town I represent, there is an enormous contribution from our local faith community. That includes churches and many other faiths. I am grateful for this opportunity to thank them for their outstanding community work at this time. I will give the example of the Whitley Community Development Association, which has benefited enormously. That group, which is led by residents in a very disadvantaged part of our community, regularly receives donations of food and other support from local churches and other faith communities. They have had support from a gurdwara as far away as Slough, which is certainly far away from a Reading perspective, although perhaps not for people outside Berkshire. I thank all those churches and other faith communities for getting involved. Other food bank support in our area includes the Trussell Trust and ReadiFood, which is heavily involved with local churches, and I thank them, as many families and pensioners are suffering enormously in the cost of living crisis.

Other notable community organisations that have a religious link include CommuniCare, which carries out very useful advice work for many residents. It has been a privilege to visit its office on a number of occasions. There are literally queues of people waiting outside in the morning to be helped by that charity. Once again, I thank local church members for supporting it. Indeed, I thank other faith communities and people of no faith for their work in community organisations.

I also pay tribute to a practical demonstration of people's faith that is truly humbling. In our town, as in many parts of the country, there is a terrific problem with homelessness. I have been privileged to visit New Beginnings, which is a wonderful community organisation that takes in people who are street homeless, and offers them a warm meal and a place to stay. It has converted a former pub, turning it into a place of refuge for people who are in deep trouble, and it offers them practical help. That was set up by a number of practising Christians, and there is a strong church element to it.

Sadaka is a similar organisation that has Muslim heritage. Equally, a number of practising Muslims wanted to show their support to the wider community. In a truly amazing demonstration of that support, they offer food regularly on a Saturday morning. It has no property of its own and is looking for one, so if anybody has a spare property in Reading to give them, we would be delighted to accept that.

I appreciate that time is limited, but two other forms of help are worth mentioning as practical demonstrations of peoples' faith in my area and across the country. The first is wider help for the vulnerable—I mention Street Pastors in particular—and the second is the long-standing work of church and faith communities in supporting international development. I particularly want to thank CAFOD—the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development. I am not a Catholic, but I am hugely supportive of its work, and it has reached out to me since I became an MP in 2017. There are many other groups, such as the charities that make up the Disasters Emergency Committee, including Oxfam, Islamic Relief and a number of others, that do incredible work. That is motivated by people's faith and belief in supporting other human beings at a time of great need. Those charities deserve huge support and appreciation for their incredibly valuable work.

There are many other groups that I have not been able to mention. I appreciate this opportunity to say some words of thanks and encouragement to the faith communities —particularly Christians, as they are the subject of the debate—that play such an important role across many fields. I also thank Support U, a charity that supports LGBT people in our area; I have had the privilege of working with that absolutely fantastic organisation.

Thank you for allowing me to take part in today's debate, Mr Mundell, and I again thank the hon. Member for Don Valley for securing it. It has been a wonderful opportunity to thank many hard-working and motivated people whose faith is at the heart of what they do.

2.1 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I am pleased to begin today's summing up, which will not be politically based, as it often is in Westminster Hall debates, because this has not been the usual type of debate and there has been a significant degree of consensus.

I want to present a slightly different view, and I say this as a lifelong committed Christian who shares many of the values that have been expressed. We need to be careful about how we talk about the history and future of Christianity in our nations and elsewhere. As I indicated in my intervention, although there is no doubt that people motivated by Christianity have been responsible for extraordinary acts of kindness, courage, bravery and selflessness, from the days of Christ himself, we cannot hide from the fact that people who claim to be acting in accordance with Christian teaching have been responsible for some of the most heinous acts ever committed on God's earth.

Slavery was set up by people who claimed that it was God's will. Apartheid was set up and maintained by people who claimed that it was God's will. We have seen acts of cruelty and barbarity during wars and crusades throughout the Christian era on earth. They were carried out by so-called Christians, but I find that impossible to reconcile with any of the teachings of Jesus, or indeed anything else among the teachings of the Church.

I had the good fortune to spend five years on the court of governors of the University of St Andrews. On the day that it had its annual chapel service in memory of the founders and current benefactors, we would go outside as soon as that was done. Just outside St Salvator's chapel, the initials "PH" are built into the pavement, and we would have a memorial service there. Patrick Hamilton was a devout Christian, and the stones mark the spot where he was slowly roasted alive by another group of devout Christians because he was devoutly the wrong kind of Christian. Later in the history of St Andrews, the tables were turned, and the other form of devout Christians were starved to death and thrown out the windows of St Andrews castle.

Tales of such barbarity between Christians have been going on for almost as long as Christianity has existed. I say that not to suggest that Christianity has been an evil influence on the world, as some people suggest, but when we talk about all the good that it has brought, we also have to be willing to recognise that it has not been a one-sided story. We have to recognise that many people across the world still find it difficult to break the bond between Christianity and slavery, colonisation, persecution and empire building—the exploitation of other lands and their people. The people responsible for those crimes were not acting in a Christian way, but in the minds of a lot of our brothers and sisters across the world, there is still an association between Christianity and the darker side of their history.

I do not accept the concept of anywhere being a Christian country. It is a matter of fact, certainly for most of our recent recorded history, that all our countries have been led by people who purported to be Christians, but that is not the same thing as being a Christian country. I point out to the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) that while he is rightly proud of a lot of the history and heritage to which he referred, a lot of it is not the heritage of all of us who attend this place; it is a heritage of one nation in the United Kingdom.

Magna Carta, for example, is an exclusively English document. We should not mention Magna Carta without recognising that, by today's standards, anyone who published it would be arrested because it was one of the most antisemitic documents that has ever been produced. It was very much of its day. While we might celebrate the liberties that it gave to some people, we have to recognise that for Jewish people in England at that time, Magna Carta was not going to liberate them from anywhere. The same is true, coincidentally, for the Claim of Right for Scotland because, by today's standards, that is an extraordinarily anti-Catholic document.

Much of the heritage that the hon. Member spoke about is, indeed, a rich heritage that anyone is entitled to be proud of. It is also not the heritage of this Parliament. It might be part of the heritage of many of the buildings in which this Parliament sits, but it is a heritage of one of its predecessor Parliaments: the English Parliament, which, with the Scottish Parliament, was combined by the union of the Parliaments. In fact, technically, the United Kingdom Parliament has been going since only the early 1800s. While we can talk about the heritage of the building, we should not make the mistake of thinking that the institution that now uses this building necessarily inherits all that heritage.

As one example, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) mentioned the religious iconography that we see in many places around here, and that is absolutely correct. However, the legacy of John Knox in my country was to destroy hundreds of years-worth of religious iconography. When we talk about Christian heritage as it is applied in this place, if this place had been in Scotland, a lot of the treasured iconography

[Peter Grant]

would have been destroyed. Again, it would have been Christian iconography being destroyed by people who said it was a Christian thing to do.

I certainly agree with one of the most poignant parts of the speech by the hon. Member for Don Valley, when he said he could not do this job without his faith. That is one thing with which I can wholeheartedly agree. I could not do anything that I have done in my life without my faith, and anybody of genuine belief in any of the faith traditions would say that.

I want to put on the record that, in almost 31 years as an elected politician, I have never felt under any pressure from anybody to speak or vote in a way that went against my Christian conscience. I know some of my colleagues have found it very difficult, but I have never found it difficult to separate what my faith tells me I should do in the way that I run my life and thinking that it then gives me the right to legislate over how other people run their lives. I remember the difficulties that some of my family and friends had when I supported the scrapping of section 28 many years ago, because the Catholic Church at that point was against scrapping section 28. I took the view that the Catholic Church tells me and I try to follow the teaching about how I practise my own sexuality, but it does not give me a right to legislate as to how anyone else practises theirs, any more than it would give me the right to legislate to say, "You have to go to mass on a Sunday, and you are not allowed to eat meat on Good Friday or Ash Wednesday."

In fact, I find that my Christian beliefs attract not nearly as much animosity on social media as some people's do, but any abuse I get on account of my faith on social media tends to come from other people who claim to be Christians. I do not think I have ever had any kind of religious-based abuse from anybody who did not make it clear that they claim to be a Christian of some kind.

Hon. Members have spoken about, for example, the decline in respect for not only Christianity generally, but the displaying of recognition of the great feasts. It saddens me that most Christians do not realise that we are coming up to the most important day of the year. Easter in the Christian tradition is significantly more important than Christmas, but we would not think it from looking at the way it is celebrated, or not. The decline in respect for Easter, and, indeed, for the true spirit of Christmas, started long before there was any noticeable number of people in these islands who professed other faiths. It probably started in days when 80% to 90% of the population would have described themselves as being Christian.

Essentially, although this is maybe too deep a subject to go into just now, the decline in Christianity that we see in the United Kingdom has been caused by Christians giving up, losing interest or just stopping being particularly concerned about it. It has not been caused by outside influences. It is a problem that has been created here within our own Christian faiths, and it can be addressed only from within Christian faiths.

There was some discussion during this debate that perhaps Church leaders should focus on the spiritual and religious message and not be talking so much about other things. I cannot speak for people of other faiths, but as a Catholic living in Scotland, I certainly have not noticed a shortage of statements from the leaders of the Catholic Church in Scotland in which they extol the essential spirituality of our faith or in which they continue to remind us what Easter, Christmas and a number of other days are really about, for example.

I have to wonder whether people who get uncomfortable when church leaders comment on social matters are uncomfortable really about the fact that their church leaders are telling them that what they are doing, the way they are acting, is not in keeping with the teaching of their faith. Certainly when I look at the principles of Catholic social teaching—it is one of the things that drive me in this place—I find it difficult. I would not challenge people's sincerity for a minute; I can only assume that those who promote some of the things that I see in this place feel that they can reconcile that to Christian social teaching and to Catholic social teaching. But—I am sorry—I find it very difficult to make that reconciliation.

Perhaps what we need to do is to recognise that how people promote their Christianity can draw people into the Church or push people away. If people speak of Christianity in one way and act in a different way, that is always going to give us a problem. I have never found a passage anywhere, in any part, of the Bible where these words appear: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, unless they came here in a small boat."

2.11 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for his efforts in securing the debate. As I am shadow Minister for local Government and faith, it is my joy and privilege to praise and talk up the vital, meaningful work of the countless religious groups that we have across the UK, especially during this time of year, which is, as has been mentioned, a special, holy time for many religions. Easter is upon us. Last night, I joined the other members of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims as they broke fast in the Speaker's House. I look forward next week to hearing more about and seeing Jewish traditions around the marking of Passover in the UK and across the world.

In my constituency of Luton North, the interfaith community is long established and a source of cohesion and strength. The Luton Council of Faiths received an award from the late Queen for its important—vital—work on faith but, importantly, community cohesion as well. I mention this interfaith work because everybody has talked about their background and I grew up in not just a mixed ethnicity, race and heritage household, but a mixed faith household, both Buddhist and Christian. When I see scenes such as those that we saw last night at Manchester Cathedral, with more than 1,000 people of all faiths and none breaking fast and coming together, welcoming each other into the cathedral in much the same way as the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) talked about— opening the doors—it is to be welcomed and celebrated.

As we approach Holy Week, when Christians across the UK and the world will reflect on both the sombre and the celebratory nature of the Easter story, it is right that we reflect, too, on their value in our society. They are moral guides, whether they are bishops leading on pressing ethical issues in the House of Lords or peacekeepers in struggling communities. Particular examples come to

mind: the former Bishop of Kensington providing comfort to the traumatised survivors and relatives following the Grenfell tragedy, and providing leadership in challenging the injustices and continued injustices that have been exposed; the retired Bishop of Liverpool, who did not leave the side of those affected by the Hillsborough disaster throughout endless let-downs, setbacks and injustices; and Pastor Mick, who has used his life experiences of violence and addiction to set up the Church on the Street and serve vulnerable people in Burnley.

We all know that, beneath those who make the headlines, many more Christians are working quietly and thanklessly on the ground, in all our constituencies, to support those who have fallen through the gaps of poverty and misfortune. Their generosity and compassion became most evident during the pandemic, when, alongside all people of faith and those of none, people relied on churches, mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras, mandirs and temples to get the message of public health and public safety out, to keep their communities fed and to meet a variety of other needs.

Peter Grant: The hon. Member is giving a very powerful speech. Does she agree that the circumstances she is describing, whereby people of a variety of faiths and people of no particular faith have all come together for the common good, are a reminder that although many of us would hold fast to what we regard as Christian values, those values are not exclusively Christian? If we recognised that a lot of those values are shared worldwide by people of many different faiths, maybe we would get on better than we do just now.

Sarah Owen: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. It is always important to note where we share values—and that always plays to our strengths.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) made a powerful point about the vital support that churches and charities provide on a non-judgmental basis not just to Christians, but to their wider communities and everybody who needs support. Churches and Christian organisations have been stepping forward where the state has largely stepped back for over a decade, and I see examples of that in my constituency. When we had fires in tower blocks, St Luke's in Leagrave provided warm banks, despite the fact that its bills are going through the roof. Christchurch Bushmead, which is at the centre of our community, has provided support for those in need. We all know about the food banks in our constituencies that are run from churches by Christian charities. As food prices climb, energy costs soar and wages fall, we cannot expect the need for food banks to diminish any time soon.

There are also the night shelters. They are less typical at this time of year, but every winter Christian organisations go above and beyond to provide warmth and shelter for homeless people. They do so not because they have an abundance of money, space or resources, but because their faith compels them to do and give what they can. I note that hon. Members have mentioned and recommended books throughout the debate, and I would love to take the opportunity to recommend a book co-written by my dear friend and the chief executive of the Christian charity Jubilee+, Natalie Williams, entitled "The Myth of the Undeserving Poor". We can add that to our reading list for the Easter recess.

Vital support, including the debt services provided by organisations such as Christians Against Poverty, is long standing but has never been so needed as it is now. CAP partners with churches of all denominations around the UK to offer personal budgeting courses and employment support, helping people to break free from the paralysing chains of debt. I will never forget the personal testimony that I heard from CAP when it came to Parliament to speak to parliamentarians about the vital work it does.

That is just a brief selection of Christian charities working domestically. Globally, there are organisations fighting bravely for religious freedoms and human rights, and tackling poverty and famine. Colleagues will be aware of the fearless work of Open Doors, which works in some of the most dangerous regions of the world to serve persecuted Christians. Over Easter, we must keep in mind worshippers and believers in places such as North Korea, Nigeria, China, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and many more, who will risk their lives to worship God at this time.

I pay tribute to International Justice Mission, which works internationally to end modern slavery; Tearfund, which has been providing disaster relief for over 50 years; and Christian Aid, which continues to lead progressive and powerful campaigns on the climate emergency. Despite how needed and important their campaigns are, such organisations are struggling. The cost of living crisis has meant that, while demand is higher than ever for food, shelter and financial support, the public's capacity to donate has declined. The fact that wages are falling far beneath inflation is forcing ordinary working people to cut back where they can. For many, that means reducing or ending charitable giving. This is where we need Government action.

I ask the Minister to go back to her team and other Government Departments, and look at what more can be done to protect our churches and charities from further financial struggle. Stronger interventions on energy costs and business rates would be a very good place to start. After 13 years of Conservative Government, where does the Minister think our country would be without the safety net provided by Christians and other faith groups? If families, children, and those out of work or struggling with addiction had only the Government to rely on, what state would our economic and social health be in? She should ask herself, honestly, whether the Government have allowed themselves to become complacent in presuming that faith groups will always be able to step forward and make up for state neglect and failure. On the contributions of Christians to fighting global issues of injustice, will the Minister update us on efforts to return the level of overseas aid to 0.7%?

This Easter, I will be celebrating the inspiring Christians around me in Luton North; the church leaders, their congregations and communities across the UK; and the charities working here and abroad to serve humanity. We can all be inspired and grateful for the hugely powerful impact that Christians have in our society, but we must never be ignorant of what they need from Government or overconfident that they will always be able to clean up our mistakes.

2.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell.

[Felicity Buchan]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing this debate on Christianity in society and on his very personal and passionate speech. My hon. Friend is a committed champion for his area and a committed advocate of the role of Christianity in our communities. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for their thoughtful and reflective contributions. I also thank the Front-Bench spokesmen, the hon. Members for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for their profound reflections.

To begin with, let me emphasise the importance of the Church as an essential pillar of society. It has been, and will always be, a bedrock of support for Christians, and it will always be an important institution in Britain. Our country has been built on Christian values, and the Church of England and the Church of Scotland are the two established Churches in the UK. As we break for Easter recess, it is important to remember and celebrate the role of the Christian Church in our history, culture and values. It not only plays an important constitutional role in our national life, but has been instrumental in fostering our values as a society—values of compassion, tolerance and respect. As my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley alluded to, love thy neighbour.

At Easter time, we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection signifies the promise of redemption and rebirth and the forgiveness of sin. In my constituency of Kensington, I have the great privilege of having a very active Christian community. My constituency has some of the major iconic churches in London: the Brompton Oratory; Holy Trinity Brompton; St Columba's, Church of Scotland; St Mary Abbots; the Notting Hill Methodist Church; and Kensington United Reform Church. I am proud to have that vibrant community.

Faith in general is a vital part of people's identities and communities. The Government fully support the invaluable work being done by people around the country who are inspired by their faith. Values such as democracy, respect for others and regard for the rule of law are supported by the overwhelming majority of people in this country. They have evolved over time to become an integral part of life in Britain today. Faith can guide the moral outlook of many. It inspires great numbers of people to public service and to helping those in greatest need. Christian values, like values found in other great faiths, are those of humanity and service to others.

The Church of England, as has been mentioned, holds a unique place in our society. As senior members of the established Church of England, 26 bishops sit as individual Lords Spiritual and are impartial Members of the House of Lords. The monarchy also plays an important constitutional and religious role in the UK, with the sovereign acting as Head of State and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. As we approach the coronation of His Majesty King Charles III, there are a number of statutes that govern the declarations and oaths that must be made by a new monarch. The oaths represent an important part of our history and traditions, symbolising the role and duties of the sovereign. Bishops provide an important independent voice and spiritual insight into the work of the upper House. While they make no claims to direct representation, they seek to be a voice for people of all faiths.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister has spoken about the monarch publicly declaring his faith on oath. Can the Government give some clear guidance on the rights and freedoms of others in our society—Christians and those of other faiths—to publicly express their faith? That right exists, but there is an enormous amount of confusion about it—indeed, in some cases, even fear. The right clearly exists, subject to some limited caveats, such as not inciting violence.

Can we also see a review of the guidelines that the police work to when they arrest or charge people on the grounds, for example, of an alleged hate crime? Again, there is a lot of confusion there. Often, the cases we hear of seem to progress and then there is clearly no case to answer. Finally, can we make it absolutely clear that no one should be arrested simply for silently praying?

Felicity Buchan: Let me address the first question. No one should be in fear of professing their faith, regardless of which faith they belong to. That is very important. I am afraid guidance to the police falls outside my jurisdiction—it is a matter for the Home Office—so I will defer on that point, but I feel strongly that everyone should be able to declare their faith.

Fiona Bruce: Perhaps the Minister will pass that request on, because it is a very real one, particularly following the recent passage of the clause in the Public Order Bill on buffer zones.

Felicity Buchan: I am happy to pass on my hon. Friend's comments.

The latest census tells us that the number of Christians living in this country has decreased; however, Christianity remains the most prominent religion. Christianity has shaped this country's history, and we should recognise and celebrate that. We can all be proud of our Christian heritage and values. My hon. Friends the Members for Congleton and for Don Valley both mentioned William Wilberforce. It was his Christian faith that led to the abolition of slavery. It was his resolute Christian faith that prompted him to become interested in social reform, including the improvement of factory conditions in Britain. He firmly believed that the revitalisation of the Church and individual Christian observance would lead to a harmonious model society.

In every city, town and village in the UK, we see the positive impact and vital contributions that Christianity, Christians and churches make to our society, as, indeed, other faiths do too. My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes mentioned the importance of Christian schools and faith schools; just before coming to the Chamber, I was with one of the schools in my constituency, All Saints Catholic College in north Kensington, which I am delighted to say is an outstanding school. There is no question but that Christian schools play an important role.

Churches are often centres of community support and provide a range of services, including after-school care, youth clubs, financial advice and addiction support, to name but a few. They often provide a safety net for those in need, running, for example, homeless shelters,

food banks and warm hubs. As the Minister for homelessness, I want to put on the record my personal thanks for everything that churches do in support of the homeless. We recently distributed a £10 million night shelter transformation fund, with a specific focus on voluntary and faith groups.

The hon. Member for Luton North asked what the Government are doing to support charities. I am delighted that the Budget included £100 million specifically to support charities, and homeless and domestic abuse charities will be beneficiaries of that. We are conscious that there are inflationary pressures in the economy and that charities need more support, so I was delighted that the Chancellor made £100 million available. That comes on top of the huge amount of support that the Government have given to those facing cost of living pressures, with £37 billion in the last Budget and a further £26 billion in the autumn statement. We are, in effect, paying half of everyone's energy bills at the moment; the average household is receiving £1,500 in support for its energy bills.

The pastoral impact of the Church extends further into our society with the provision of chaplaincy across the public sector, including in prisons, hospitals and the armed forces. The Government recognise and support the importance of faith. My colleague Baroness Scott, the Minister for faith, continues to champion the brilliant work of our faith communities up and down the country. She regularly meets leaders from across faith groups in our country.

We were the first Government to commission a wide-ranging review of how the Government engage with faith. As Members may be aware, the independent faith engagement adviser, Colin Bloom, will soon publish his review. He will make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about how the Government can celebrate the contribution of faith groups and their positive role in society, while also tackling harmful practices. There was an unprecedented number of responses—21,000—to the review's public call for evidence. That demonstrates the high level of interest in religion and faith across our society. We will carefully consider Colin Bloom's recommendations when the report is published.

Sarah Owen: I am grateful for the Minister's considered response. Will she answer my question about returning overseas aid spending to 0.7%?

Felicity Buchan: That falls outside my remit—it is a Foreign Office matter—but I will certainly pass on the hon. Lady's question.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Christian Church for everything it has done for the people of this country. The Government's support for the Christian Church reflects the importance of religion in the UK. Religion plays a significant role in the lives of many people, and the Government are committed to ensuring that it can continue to play a positive role in society. By working together, we can achieve even more to help our faith communities.

Before I conclude, let me take this opportunity to reiterate the important message that the Government are fully behind the work of our faith communities. Easter is the very foundation of the Christian faith. For Christians worldwide, the importance of Easter is in praising and acknowledging Jesus Christ's resurrection and what that means to them. Easter is a time when we can all learn from Christians coming together, and a time we can all share with loved ones in unison.

I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley and everyone else who has taken part in this timely debate a very happy Easter.

2.35 pm

Nick Fletcher: I thank all Members for attending today. I am very pleased to see so many people here on the Thursday before recess. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who named all the Christian charities that are helping in his constituency, and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), both for her continued support and for sharing her story of faith.

The fantastic Christians in Parliament all-party parliamentary group is one of the most active APPGs in this place, and I thank it for all its work. I have Bible study on a Wednesday morning and everyone is welcome—please do contact me. It is so wonderful to be part of that group. When I first came here as a Member of Parliament, I knew literally nobody, and the APPG helped me through that period. It was a fantastic group to get to know.

I thank the Minister for her response to the debate. I know that she will report back to the Government on how important this subject is and how well attended the debate was. She will obviously make sure that Christians are thought of when anything happens in Government; it is really important that we think of people of faith. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for letting me have this debate, which is really appreciated, and I thank you, Mr Mundell, for chairing it.

Easter is, more than anything else, a time to reflect. The main point of Easter is that Christ died for our sins and he forgave us. That is something we should all remember, and we should follow Christ's lead on that. No matter how we have been wronged, and no matter how far in the past—whether we were wronged centuries ago, weeks ago or today, or whether we will be wronged in the future—the message of Christ's story, more than anything else, is forgiveness. I understand how difficult it is to forgive, but if we can all learn to forgive each other, we will have a wonderful future. Happy Easter, everybody.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Christianity in society.

Easter Adjournment

2.38 pm

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

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I place on the record my thanks to Madam Deputy Speaker for allowing flexibility this afternoon, enabling us literally to move from one debate to another, rather than this second debate starting strictly at 3 pm, as would normally be the case. That flexibility allows Members to contribute and indeed allows us to have a full and proper debate.

The only shame, of course, is that the Government have chosen to put on a debate in the main Chamber today on a very important topic—the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement—rather than allowing us to debate these matters there. Nevertheless, we have been elevated to this Chamber as a result, and I am glad to see many Members here to contribute to the debate.

At this time of year, we of course remember the late Sir David Amess, who would give a valedictory performance in these debates. I am afraid that I will not attempt to cover the number of subjects that he normally covered—

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): That's a shame!

Bob Blackman: The hon. Member may regret saying that by the time I sit down. *[Laughter.]* However, I will seek to raise a number of topics.

Let me kick off with the excellent performance of Harrow Council. In less than a year, it has managed to balance the budget overall, saving itself from bankruptcy, and ensuring that there is transparency in putting residents first in the delivery of services.

Over the Easter holiday, more than 1,000 free places will be available for children and young people aged five to 16 at the various different local clubs and activities for the school holidays. That will entertain children over the holidays, help them make new friends, allow parents to work, and help with childcare costs. Each space will include a free, nutritious meal per day. More than 20 organisations in my borough have received funding to deliver the activities, which include sports, arts and crafts, skills workshops, cooking clubs, theatre and other trips, and much more. There is also much-needed provision for those with special educational needs.

As the weather improves and spring is upon us, Harrow Council is embarking on the reworking of 37 tennis courts in 13 parks in the borough, bringing them up to a high standard. Thanks go to the Lawn Tennis Association for funding that, because at the moment 11 are literally unusable. Encouraging people to play safely outside and to play more sport has to be good news as we enter the summer months and as we look forward the Wimbledon championships.

On a less happy note, antisocial behaviour has clearly grown in recent years across the country, including in my borough, although I welcome the Government's strategic plan on combating antisocial behaviour, which was announced this week. At the moment, 11% of my casework is on antisocial behaviour, and it is the second most recorded crime in Harrow—second only to vehicle crime. This year, 5,550 incidents have been reported to Harrow Council and the police.

I welcome Harrow's positive measure of consulting on a public spaces protection order aimed at tackling antisocial behaviour. The order would result in fines of £100 for anyone caught urinating, defecating or spitting anywhere in the borough. The council is also considering imposing restrictions on bird feeding and requiring dogs to be on leads in parks. The consultation runs for eight weeks until 15 May and seeks the views of Harrow residents and businesses.

The council aims to crack down further on antisocial behaviour, such as fly-tipping, which is endemic in Harrow and I am sure in many other places; street drinking; and uncontrolled dogs. The order would allow immediate enforcement action to be taken, including against those who drive over and damage footpaths, making them unsafe for walkers, and those who fail to pick up dog mess after dogs have been around.

Of course, we are in the run-up to the expansion of the ultra low emission zone. Unfortunately, we have not had a proper response from the Mayor's office to the 41 constituents who wrote with detailed questions and concerns about the ULEZ. All those were sent to the Mayor's office some months ago but, instead of a personalised response answering each constituent's concerns, in a Kafkaesque move, we received a generic send-to-all copy-and-paste, and now we are simply being ignored when we send chasers.

I am pleased to have launched a ULEZ poll and petition. In just three weeks, we have had more than 250 responses. Surprise, surprise: 96% do not support the ULEZ expansion, with only 10 people—none of them with a car—saying that they do support it. More than 260 people have now signed the petition calling on the Mayor to reverse the ULEZ expansion to Harrow. Despite that, cameras are going up across the borough, to the obvious dissatisfaction of residents.

To good news once again, Mr Mundell: Home Office responses to casework are improving. The list of Home Office cases with which my office is dealing is down from more than 180 to 26. We are still struggling with some long-standing cases, which are more complicated—the oldest started on 23 July 2021—and urgent and last-minute cases, one of which was referred to in the main Chamber this morning, on matters such as urgent visas, funerals and fast-track services that are not being dealt with in the time promised.

As the protests in Iran rage on, I visited the Iranian Ashraf 3 refugee camp last month to meet Maryam Rajavi. It was deeply overwhelming to visit the museum that details the torture and deaths of as many as 120,000 MEK—Mojahedin-e-Khalq—supporters over the years of struggle for a democratic Iran. In 2015, Iran launched a 40-rocket attack against Ashraf 2, the camp's previous home, sited in Iraq, leaving 24 dead and forcing the other refugees to move to Albania. Albania does not always get good press in this place, but let us thank the Albanian Government for allowing Ashraf 3 to be set up and enabling those refugees to settle.

I unreservedly condemn the Government of Iran's actions in suppressing the protests in their country, and I deplore the violent behaviour of the Iranian police. I continue to be deeply concerned by reports of threats made to organisations in the UK that support the rights

of protesters in Iran. I will continue to urge the Government to include the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the list of proscribed terrorist organisations and to work with our international counterparts to ensure that further sanctions are placed on Iran without delay.

The recent attack on the Indian high commission was more than just a hullabaloo. The hooliganism of some Khalistani demonstrators outside the Indian high commission is a disgrace to this country. This is the sixth time in as many years that it has been attacked in a similar way. Security guards were injured, windows were smashed, an attempt was made to remove the tricolour, and further damage was caused. I drew attention to that at business questions last week. I was very careful about my words—I said that these were Khalistani militants—but sadly the people who put subtitles on social media decided to substitute "Sikh" for "Khalistani". I made it very clear that the vast majority of Sikhs in this country are law-abiding citizens who behave properly and appropriately. Indeed, this country owes a big debt to the Sikh community for coming to our aid during the great war and the second world war.

The fact is that these militants operate across Canada, the United States and Australia at the same time. We are harbouring a number of organisations that are proscribed by India—our friend. They are terrorists, and they should be proscribed and prevented from taking further action. I commend the bravery of the officials at the high commission, who, rather than protect themselves during the attack, simply replaced the flag with an even bigger version, demonstrating that they would not be cowed by the demonstration.

Last week, I welcomed a group of Romanian MPs and ambassadors to Parliament for a series of meetings on Romania. They also participated in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office conference to strengthen our bilateral relations. In Harrow East alone, we have 11,000 Romanians, who contribute positively to society and our economy. One thing that shocked me was the lack of a Romanian GCSE in this country, despite the fact that there are about 350,000 Romanian young people living here. There is already a Polish GCSE, so why are we discriminating against our Romanian friends? I have raised this matter already with the Education Secretary. I trust that her Department and the Government will continue to look at the opportunity.

I am pleased that my private Member's Bill—the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill—has gone through the Commons and will enter the other place on 21 April. I have been consulting local authorities, providers and stakeholders in the sector regularly to continue resolving any concerns or questions they have. I hope my Bill will fly through the other place. Lord Best is piloting it, as he did for my previous private Member's Bill. It is crucial that rogue landlords are regulated to protect vulnerable tenants from exploitation. I recently learned of two tragic homicides as a result of irresponsible and negligent landlords. That highlights how important the Bill is to the supported housing sphere.

I have been lucky to visit India on several occasions recently, and I am pleased to have met a wide range of people: Government officials, ambassadors, businessmen and women, and the general public. It is clear that both countries are extremely supportive of the potential for the India-UK free trade deal. We are now on the eighth round of talks on the deal. Although we were promised it would be signed by Diwali last year, let us hope it will come into operation by Diwali this year. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for India (Trade and Investment). We plan a delegation in the very near future, and I am sure that parliamentarians will continue to strengthen and champion relations between the countries.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for taking my earlier intervention in good humour. Talking about India and trade, would he also be interested in the newly formed all-party parliamentary group for kabaddi? The British Kabaddi League has now been set up, and my constituent Prem Singh is very active in it and is liaising in India to promote the sport of kabaddi both here in the UK and in India.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I noticed the setting up of that all-party parliamentary group, and I confess that I was ignorant of the sport. I will certainly look at and consider participating in it.

Let me also mention smoking, which remains the biggest cause of cancer and avoidable death, with 78,000 people dying as a result each year. Reducing the number of smokers will benefit the NHS, the individuals' health and the health of those around them considerably. This is a cause I am very passionate about, because both my late parents died as a result of smoking-related cancer. For me, this is deeply personal, and I will continue to champion the cause.

Indeed, I proposed a ten-minute rule Bill that would mean, were it to be passed by this place, that any retailer looking to sell tobacco goods would have to hold a licence, as is currently the case with alcohol. That would mean that, to ensure that their licences are not revoked, vendors would have to be aware of the importance of proof of age when selling products. Further, I hope it would eradicate the sale of fake or copy tobacco goods, which are often cheaper and remain untested and very harmful materials. As we approach a year since the eye-opening Khan review, I hope that the Minister will consider the proposals and publish the Government's long-awaited tobacco review plan imminently. I utter a "gardyloo"—we are growing impatient for that tobacco control plan to be implemented.

Finally, I wish everyone who is celebrating a very happy and healthy Eid and Easter, because we are of course not only celebrating the festival of Ramadan but breaking for Easter. We also have the festival of Passover, which Jews will be celebrating, and today is Rama Navami—a tongue-twister if ever there were one—when Hindus celebrate, once again, the triumph of good over evil. I trust that everyone will be able to relax and enjoy some time with family, friends and loved ones over this period, as well as of course to campaign in the local elections. Most importantly, I hope that hon. Members can take time for reflection, whichever religion they follow, so that they come back refreshed and in a better mood.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Blackman, and thank you for referencing Sir David Amess, who was indeed a stalwart of these debates. I am sure that he would have given you a "highly commended" for your efforts to follow in his footsteps.

2.52 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that this important opportunity to raise issues is taking place in this Chamber today. I have two particularly very personal issues, and then a couple of others that affect a wider group of constituents. I would ordinarily have liked to raise them in an individual Adjournment debate, which is another reason why I am grateful to raise these important matters.

[Martin Vickers *in the Chair*]

The first is a very tragic case, and the wider issue is about how schools support pupils with medical conditions. The issue arises because my constituent Lorna Williams lost her nine-year-old son, Rasharn, who died at a school in my constituency in October 2014. Rasharn had a heart condition that the school knew about, but when he fell ill after dancing at the school disco, an ambulance was not called immediately, and he died later that evening in hospital. I pay huge credit to Lorna and her family. Despite suffering the most unimaginable loss, Lorna still wants to campaign to ensure that no other mother goes through what she has had to live through. She has had to go through the many inquiries and processes that surround a death of this nature, and in the middle of it was her lovely little boy Rasharn. While those inquiries progress, it feels like a long time before any answers come. In many cases, there are more questions than answers, as was indeed the case for Rasharn.

Lessons need to be learned from Rasharn's death, and we need the Government, schools and education authorities to take them on board. The first lesson is the importance of clear and accurate record keeping in respect of medical conditions, so that everybody in a school—the teachers, the support staff; indeed, where appropriate, other pupils—understand the actions that need to be taken in different circumstances for different children, so that all staff are aware of that information. They cannot all be aware in the moment, so there need to be proper records; that way, staff can access the records on an individual child at the moment a crisis strikes.

It seems there is not always clear guidance to schools on how individual healthcare plans should be formatted so that it is easy to find the right information at the right moment. Lorna remembers sometimes coming back from hospital appointments with updates on Rasharn's condition and never being quite sure if it was going to be filed in the right place or that it would be passed on to the special educational needs teacher or the classroom teacher. Parents of all children, but especially those with special health problems, need to have the confidence that the school will handle that information consistently and properly.

Looking to see if any statutory guidance could be provided, we had a meeting that was very productive, on the face of it, with the then schools Minister, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), and officials in January 2022. We were grateful for that meeting, which was still online because of lockdown restrictions. When we discussed this idea, the Minister and officials were receptive to it, but we have had little follow-up since. Of course, there have been rather a lot of Ministers since then, which has not helped the situation. One reason I want to raise this issue today is that we cannot forget this matter. Obviously, it matters to Lorna Williams, although for her it is too late, but it also matters for the children following.

First, what we would like to see—what Lorna, particularly, would like to see—is clarity on what information schools hold and, as I have said, ensure that it is very accessible. We are also considering whether it is possible to have wristbands or some other clear identifier—where a parent and child agree it, of course, as there are privacy issues; not every child or parent might want that. Where that is accepted by the parent and child, such a measure would allow the school to see, if a child falls over in the playground or has an incident, instantly whether there is a particular need to action a very quick process to call an ambulance, if appropriate, or the relevant authorities.

Nothing can bring Rasharn back, but what Lorna Williams needs is a clear hearing from Government. I ask this for her today. We have had that first conversation, but I look to the Minister today to raise this with the Department for Education to see what we can do. We are not after masses of extra bureaucracy for schools, because we know that would be counterproductive; however, we need to see what can be done better and done more consistently so that other children and parents do not go through this situation.

I have a second issue to raise, Mr Vickers—it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, too. I have seen off one Chairman already. This issue, again, is a personal matter for a constituent of mine who worked in the Secret Intelligence Service—the SIS—from 1975 until 1984 with a record of high performance and positive feedback from his superiors. He has since seen his own personnel records, and I have seen notes from those records. In 1984, he was offered a fantastic opportunity to serve at a station abroad. While discussing that opportunity with his personnel officer, my constituent disclosed that he was gay. Very shortly afterwards, his employment was terminated, and it was expressly explained that his sexual orientation was the reason for his dismissal. That dismissal, as we all now know, was an injustice, but it was within the rules of the SIS at the time.

I have seen correspondence between my constituent and various officials, and I have also raised this through the system. I think there is genuine embarrassment now about the calumny that was visited upon my constituent and others. To be sacked from one's job simply because of one's sexual orientation is unacceptable.

There have been a number of consequences for my constituent. He had what looked like a potentially glittering career, because he was a very good civil servant and was very good at his job. That ended, so he has not had the opportunity to progress in something that he absolutely loved doing. Crucially, he has also been denied the right to continue to build up his pension.

As recently as 2019, the chief of the Secret Intelligence Service apologised for the historical treatment of LGBT+ people in the secret services. He has said clearly—I hope we all agree with this—that the security bar on LGBT staff until 1991 had been "wrong, unjust and discriminatory". An independent review is currently under way to examine the effects that the pre-2000 ban on homosexuality in the UK armed forces has had on LGBTQ+ veterans, so there is precedent for looking at what the impact has been on people who, through no fault of their own, were sacked or had to hide their sexuality and be something that they were not at work.

The Government have accepted that the historical policy of banning homosexuality in the armed forces and the secret services was wrong, but they are not reviewing the situation in the secret services, so I believe that the review on the armed forces should be widened to include civil servants who have been affected by the Government's treatment of LGBTQ+ staff in the past, such as my constituent. If that is not possible because it has gone too far down the line—although there are so many similarities that it would make sense logically and financially, and for expediency, to include such people in the same review—I would call for a similar independent review on the non-military civil servants affected in this way. I imagine that it is a relatively small number. It has been difficult to get information on this issue, because a lot of people would not have declared their sexuality in the first place. They may not even have joined the service in the first place. This issue matters massively, but I do not believe that a large number of civil servants will have lost their pension rights as a result.

The Government need to right this wrong by addressing the issue across the board. Tackling it on a piecemeal basis will be a lengthy process for the Government and those involved, and unjust for those who have missed out, and we need a standard approach and recognition across Government that the calumny of the past is righted. I hope that the Minister can secure me a meeting with the relevant Minister to see whether we can make progress. I could forgo the meeting if the Government write back and say they will agree to address the issue, but I might accept a meeting in the interim.

My next issue causes misery for many of my constituents: delays to lift repairs. I sense recognition from around the Chamber. There are often issues with obtaining key electrical parts for lifts, because they are in short supply and difficult to obtain, and there are problems with the supply chain. But having looked into this because I was so concerned—whichever landlord I am dealing with, there are problems with lifts—I have discovered a bigger issue. I should just highlight the impact on people. I have a constituent who lives on the seventh floor of a tower block. One day, he went out to visit a friend when one lift was out of operation. When he came back three hours later, the second lift was out of operation. He had to walk up seven flights of stairs with his oxygen, so this issue is having an absolutely huge impact on people's lives. If a lift is not working and someone lives high up, they are effectively trapped in their home and cannot go out.

I have raised this problem with a number of landlords, and I have picked up that four main lift providers dominate the lift market in the UK: Otis, Schindler, KONE and ThyssenKrupp, also known as TK Elevator. The lift providers want the landlords and developers who buy the lifts to take out maintenance contracts with them, which sounds a bit like a cartel. Independent contractors, who may be more on the spot in Hackney, Harrow, Newport, Reading or Congleton, have issues accessing technical information to maintain the provider's lifts, and the providers often say that they will nullify the insurance policy on a lift if any other contractor gets stuck in and tries to resolve the problem.

Instead of the closed protocol system, I would like to see an open protocol system that offers customers, landlords and developers a greater deal of flexibility, as they could choose from a variety of suppliers. They could also choose from a range of engineers. Virtually any trained engineer can do these repairs, which will ensure that they choose whoever offers the most value for money or expertise. Crucially, it would open up the market. The Government would want to see that to ensure we can create jobs in this area.

The closed protocol that the four main providers insist on is much more insular. Customers can only install components from the same company that provided the overall system due to compatibility issues. That can often be very expensive for the customer as there is a lack of market competition to help drive down costs. It needs to be resolved. I was surprised when I started looking into it; I thought it was going to be about other issues. There was another issue about the availability of semiconductors. However, the main issue is that we should ensure more competition in the market, and that there is not this closed approach. That would make a difference.

Finally, I turn to an issue that I raise, sadly, very often at such debates and in the House: housing in my constituency. I have more private renters than homeowners, and around 50% of residents in my constituency are social housing tenants. There is talk about the renters reform Bill coming through. In that Bill, I want to see greater rights for tenants. We are hearing some good noises from the Government, but then we keep hearing some backtracking here and there. Maybe the Minister can even give us some answers today, as we keep being told that legislation is imminent. We need to see longer-term tenancies—homes that people can raise their families in. They should not be worrying every year that the rent will go up so much it will become unaffordable for them to stay there, or that they will be evicted.

We need certainty over rent levels. I favour a rent escalator model. Just as we know that social housing rent will go up by the consumer prices index or the retail price index plus 1%, we could at least have a similar model for private rented housing, which would give certainty to both sides of the equation. We also see some properties in very poor repair. According to work done by the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office, 13% of private rented properties nationally in England are posing an actual risk. There is a quality issue. In fact, there is just a crisis in the private rented market generally.

Overall, we need a much bigger housebuilding programme and more social housing. We need social housing in Hackney in particular because private rents are so high that they are unaffordable. If someone gets a job they suddenly cannot afford the rent, and the cap on housing benefit means that they cannot pay rent on any family-sized home within my constituency.

The number of households in temporary accommodation in Hackney is over 3,100. Over half of those are sadly housed outside the borough due to a lack of supply. I am not talking about a lack of supply of housing overall; that is just a lack of supply of temporary housing, often including hostel spaces. That equates to 3,528 children in temporary accommodation—enough to fill eight primary schools and equivalent to 1% of Hackney's total population.

The number of households seeking support for homelessness has risen by 44% from 2017 to the end of the last financial year. Hackney Council anticipates that the number of approaches will continue to increase

[Dame Meg Hillier]

at around 8% a year. That is unsustainable. We need to see properly affordable housing. With a decent home over their head, someone can get a job. They can study. Their mental health improves. It is the key to solving many of society's crises. It is the key to families establishing themselves and being able to live their lives as they choose. It gives them freedom and independence.

I want to touch on rent figures in Hackney. The average two-bed rent for a private sector property is around £2,000 a month, but there are currently fewer private rented properties available due to many issues, which I will not go into today. I will touch on overcrowding in a moment, but the average waiting time for council and housing association housing for homeless households is three years for a one-bedroom property, 12 years for a two-bedroom property, nine years for a three-bedroom property, 13 for a four-bedroom property and a notional 39 years for a five-bedroom property. That is notional because by the time a person gets to 39 years, those are nonsense figures.

It is unbelievable that people have got no hope. I have visited families week in, week out on doorsteps, meeting people where they live. I recently met a woman who was living high up in a block with four little girls in two bedrooms, one living area and a tiny kitchen. One child slept with the parents and the three other girls shared bunk beds in one room. Similarly, I have seen adult children in that situation, where three adult children are sharing a room and the parents live in the living room. We have many households where one family live in the living room and another in the bedroom, and we have families staying with someone from their church because that is the only place they can get accommodation. Even if they had recourse to public funds, which can be an issue for some people, that is not the barrier; the barrier is the lack of quality, affordable social housing.

I give credit to the Mayor of Hackney, Phil Glanville, for his work in trying to resolve this issue. He is planning to build 1,000 council homes, with 350 near the De Beauvoir estate that are part way through the process. That is great, but it is a drop in the ocean. Because of a lack of Government funding for social housing, one has to be built for sale to provide one for social rent.

We talk about affordability. There are about five or six categories of affordable housing, but let me be clear what I mean by affordable: it needs to be affordable for someone on a reasonable wage to pay. We have people who are working and who can barely afford to pay their council rent, let alone ever being able to afford to rent privately. This gives them no choice and locks them in overcrowded conditions. It is bad for their mental health, it can impact on their ability to work and it has a huge impact on their children. Children grow up in such situations until they are in their 20s, and then they cannot move anywhere—imagine growing up like that.

This is the crisis of a generation. This is the Government that delivered home ownership to the masses through right to buy, which I will not go into today. The Government have totally failed on housing provision for people, whether they are private renters, those who rent socially or many others who are locked out of the home ownership market. On every level, the Government have not acted. I hope the Minister can give us some hope from the legislation that is coming through, as well as some insight into the discussions between the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Treasury over his ambition, as we have read, to provide more social housing and the Treasury's ambition to trim his spending. It would be helpful to have some sense from the Government as to the direction of travel. It is little comfort for my constituents who are trapped in housing, but we need to ensure the next generation get the homes they deserve.

3.12 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I would like to speak to just one concern today, and that will probably come as a great relief to the Minister. I want to speak at some length, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to do so. It relates to my role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief—a role I hugely enjoy and count as a great privilege, having the potential to make a real difference to some of the most oppressed and vulnerable people on earth.

My mandate from the Prime Minister refers to three strands of work, and I want to raise my concern regarding progress on one of them, which is my duty to support the implementation of the Truro review. The review was initiated in 2019 by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) when he was Foreign Secretary to improve support within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for persecuted Christians and, by extension, all who are persecuted across the world, of whatever faith or belief.

I will touch on the other two strands of my role. They are to work on

"how the UK government can protect and promote this fundamental freedom internationally"

and to work with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, as I do. This growing alliance of countries is appointing ambassadors or envoys like myself—I am working on hopefully being promoted to ambassador, but for the moment I am content to be an envoy. There are 42 countries that have committed to promoting and protecting this freedom around the world, championing its good use and calling out its abuses. Both the number of countries and the substance of our work is growing. It is my privilege to have been elected chair in 2022 and re-elected for 2023.

On another occasion, I would like to talk much more about our work, but I will briefly touch on it before I move on to my main concern about progress on the Truro review. The FORB special envoy team is myself, the Prime Minister's deputy special envoy, David Burrowes—the only deputy special envoy there is—my parliamentary aide Chloe Black and my private secretary from the FCDO, Sue Breeze. We work together, and I commend the tremendous dedication of my colleagues in the special envoy team to this work. I am greatly encouraged by the progress we have made over the last two-plus years, since my appointment and that of David Burrowes, to ensure that the UK continues to be seen as a leader across the world in addressing freedom of religion or belief. As a special envoy team, we are working with others across civil society—non-governmental organisations, academics and my counterpart envoys and ambassadors from the alliance countries—because we all recognise that nothing is achieved alone in this challenging sphere.

We have developed a number of areas of action since the London ministerial conference last July. Time sadly precludes my going into the detail of those areas of action, but I will list them. We are developing education materials on FORB for the very youngest children. That is being piloted in four schools in this country, including one in my constituency.

We are inspiring the next generation of FORB ambassadors by planning for a global virtual conference this autumn, which will involve 1,000 young people joining virtually from around the world—including those in countries such as Myanmar and Pakistan, where they are experiencing real-life persecution—who will be able to share their experiences with other young people. Hopefully, we will galvanise young people from around the world to speak out, particularly using the social media tools they have so effectively used in challenging issues regarding climate change.

We are championing individual prisoners of conscience, such as young Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, who is 19 and in Nigeria. He is actually a little older than 19 now, but at 19 he was arrested on a charge of blasphemy, because one of his friends shared some music he had written. He was taken to court without any legal representation and he has been sentenced to death by hanging. We are supporting his appeal to the Supreme Court. We are building an international network of FORB roundtables, including a particularly strong one in central and eastern Europe around the countries where Putin is attacking Ukraine. Those countries that suffered under communism and know what it is not to have freedom of religion or belief are very exercised about this issue right now.

We are networking human rights defenders, engaging the media on FORB, working with lawyers on legislative reform and protecting religious and cultural heritage. I have recently written to every one of our UK diplomatic posts across the world, and I am greatly encouraged by the responses I have had to date showing that they are increasingly aware of the importance of freedom of religion or belief in their missions.

All of that is good news, but I will return to the main purpose of my speech. My concern is that while so much progress is being made internationally, and with the UK playing a leading role, the same sadly cannot be said for progress on implementing the Truro review in the FCDO. Indeed, work on the Truro review, which is a manifesto commitment, appears to be stalling.

Five written parliamentary questions were recently raised by one of our senior parliamentary colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). Those questions specifically requested progress on recommendations 4, 5, 6, 12 and 17 in the Truro review. Disappointingly, all five questions received the same answer—a generic reply that did not address the specific questions or recommendations raised at all. I know that concerns about the need for further progress on Truro are shared by other parliamentary colleagues and by the Bishop of Truro himself, who remains actively and admirably engaged on this issue—in fact, he has just returned from several days in Greece, where he has been speaking about the issue.

One year ago, an independent assessment was undertaken of progress on the Truro review. It was a three-year assessment, required by the Truro review under recommendation 22, to measure progress. It was conducted by three world-renowned FORB experts, including the then UN special rapporteur on FORB and the current UN special rapporteur on FORB—one cannot get much more expert than that. Their detailed expert assessment clearly indicated that there was, and is, still much to do to implement Truro and honour our manifesto commitment.

That detailed assessment contained many constructive suggestions for progress and best practice. When it was published, I pressed for those to be acted on, particularly the experts' recommendation for a comprehensive operational action plan on FORB in the FCDO—that is not the same thing as a FORB strategy. I pressed for the need for better co-ordinated work on the part of those in the FCDO working on FORB; for greater engagement at a more senior level in the FCDO; and for the implementation of appropriate working groups, including jointly with other Government Departments where FORB matters.

The then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), in a written ministerial statement published at the time of the ministerial conference on FORB in July 2022, accepted the expert assessment and its conclusions in full, stating:

> "We welcome and accept this expert review on progress and in line with the findings, accept their assessment for the need to continue to work to promote and strengthen Freedom of Religion or Belief as a fundamental human right for all…we will continue to ensure that the changes we have made are embedded and to look for opportunities to make FoRB central to the FCDO's wider human rights work."

At the time of the very successful FORB ministerial conference in July 2022, to which 88 countries sent official delegates, expectations were raised internationally and domestically about the UK championing FORB and fully implementing the Truro review. In September 2022, I raised a question in the House about progress on Truro and the adoption of the experts' recommendations in their three-year assessment. My hope was to politely nudge people about the fact that the work needed to continue and, indeed, to be more focused. I again raised my concerns more explicitly and in more detail in a debate in this room in November when I said, among other points:

> "The Truro review is a manifesto commitment and there are still outstanding elements to be fulfilled. I hope that the Minister will concur with me—indeed, it is in accordance with the Prime Minister's determination to address outstanding manifesto commitments—that work on the Truro review should be completed. It is about promoting not just freedom of religion for Christians, but freedom of religion or belief for all."

I went on to say that it was "well over six months" since that expert assessment was completed,

> "and action on the comprehensive operational action plan needs to be taken forward. A lack of joined-up working within the FCDO on FORB means that resources are not being used as efficiently as they could be, and that needs to change."—[*Official Report,* 17 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 369WH.]

I most recently raised a question on Truro's progress earlier this month. Sadly, none of my interventions to date appear to have initiated an appropriate degree of action, hence my need to be more forthright today. To quote one my colleagues:

> "We cannot simply shuffle Truro off half-done."

The Truro review was considered a landmark document when it was published in 2019, and it made an international impact. I know from my travels in my role across many countries that it continues to be hugely respected. At the

[Fiona Bruce]

same time, many across the world are watching to see how it is implemented. We must continue to work on it. If we do not, we will not only be perceived by others to be going backwards in an area on which we have led internationally to date, but we will actually slip backwards. There are best practice suggestions in Truro to ensure we keep our feet to the fire; it is an ongoing piece of work.

It was, as Ministers know, a great disappointment to me that freedom of religion or belief was omitted from the recent integrated review refresh. Yes, I understand that that document was meant to be an evolution from the 2021 integrated review and that Ministers did not want to make it too long, but it is actually only half the length of the 2021 document and, however we nuance it, the omission of FORB has sent out a signal. Renewed energy in the implementation of Truro would help to address that.

I have one specific suggestion to make to Ministers for immediate action, please. This relates to recommendation 6 of the Truro review, which recommended that the role of special envoy on FORB be established permanently. The expert assessment of that in the review three years later noted that

"'no substantial action has been taken, to date' with respect to delivering this".

If we are to ensure that the role I hold is not at the discretion of an individual Prime Minister—although it has been my great privilege to serve under three Prime Ministers—but is embedded in statute and continues under successive Governments, a short Bill is required in this Parliament. That would send out a clear public statement internationally about our continuing commitment to FORB and, indeed, to the implementation of the Truro review. Will Ministers work with me to ensure that? I am optimistic about such a Bill being passed, and hopefully with the support of all parties, given the substantial cross-party support in this House for freedom of religion or belief—something that I now know is unique across the world and that we should rightly be proud of.

In addition to work on recommendation 6, there is much outstanding work on the other Truro recommendations. I hope that Ministers will similarly support me to ensure that that happens. I should mention that in expressing these concerns about the implementation of Truro, I am not in any way disparaging Ministers' commitment to FORB. I know that every Prime Minister under whom I have served in this role, every Foreign Secretary and all other FCDO Ministers are absolutely committed not only to the UK's wider FORB work, but to the Truro review in particular. That includes Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Minister with responsibility for human rights, whom I work alongside and who is personally seized of the importance of this issue. I look forward to continuing to work with them and to ensuring that our manifesto commitment, which states that we

"will seek to protect those persecuted for their faith and implement the Truro Review recommendations",

is honoured and fulfilled in full.

3.27 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. May I start by commending the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her work in championing the rights of people who face persecution—both Christians and others around the world—and by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), who is campaigning on a number of important fronts? Not only do I wholeheartedly support that, but many of my own residents face the same enormous difficulties with the high cost of housing in London and the south-east, and people face enormous overcrowding in Reading town centre.

I want to take this opportunity to champion a very important local campaign in Reading and Berkshire. I have been pursuing this for some time and have had enormous support from the right hon. Member for Reading West (Sir Alok Sharma), Reading Borough Council and many local groups in our community. It is the campaign to save Reading gaol and to turn the famous Victorian gaol into an arts and heritage hub, so that we may celebrate the heritage of Oscar Wilde and the other important national and local heritage that is part of the gaol and the surrounding site, for the good of the community, to celebrate diversity and to support the LGBT community and the arts across Berkshire and the wider UK.

I want to update the House briefly on where I am with the campaign, but also to point out some of its important features and urge the Government to support the local bid for an arts-based solution for the building—it is currently mothballed—rather than the commercial redevelopment favoured by the Ministry of Justice, which would like the Victorian building to be turned into a hotel or possibly into luxury flats. As anybody who has been through our area recently will have seen if they travelled on the train, or as colleagues from Wales who travel on the motorway may have seen, Berkshire is dominated by a large amount of urban development. Many flats are being built, but we do not have a major hub for our wonderful arts community to perform in and put on stage productions. We have some centres, but they are dispersed around the town and the area. Similarly sized cities and towns in the south-east of England, such as Brighton, Oxford and Southampton, have large arts organisations based in purpose-built theatres, and much bigger centres than the ones we have in Reading, although we are the second largest urban area in the south-east of England after the Greater Brighton area.

I turn to the history of this important site. Reading gaol was the county jail for Berkshire. It was built on the site of Reading abbey, a major medieval building that was one of the largest abbeys in England in medieval times. It was founded by King Henry I and was a centre of pilgrimage throughout the middle ages. Indeed, Henry I is believed to be buried there. Rather like Leicester, Worcester and a number of other medieval towns and cities—I am sure this applies to Scotland and Wales too—we have a monarch buried in our town centre.

The gaol was designed by the architect who designed Pentonville and St Pancras station. It is a masterpiece of Victorian gothic architecture. Anyone who walks past it or goes in will see scenes that remind them of "Porridge", if, like me, they are a fan of it—younger Members may have dabbled in UK Gold and seen it fleetingly. Reading gaol has all the echoes of a Victorian building; people can walk through it and feel that presence. It is rather grim in some ways, but it is historic and very important.

The gaol was opened briefly in 2014, and was used for art installations. An amazing arts organisation called Artangel used each individual cell to house installation art. It also put on performances in the prison chapel, and it had a number of other activities. It was incredibly powerful. I walked along one of the metal landings, which are reminiscent of "Porridge", behind a very famous BBC arts presenter—I will not name him—and it was quite wonderful to hear what he said. As I said, we suffer from a lack of institutions to support our amazing local art scheme. He was on his phone to his friends back in London, and he said something along the lines of, "I'm in Reading, in the gaol, and it's actually really rather interesting."

Like many towns and cities around the country, we suffer from a lack of support from the national arts establishment. It would be wonderful to see that sort of provision permanently in our town. It could be a venue for local young people, community groups and charities. We have had a lot of interest from the local LGBT community, which wants to use part of the building as a hub for its activities, and other historical and community groups would like to take part in the same way.

The tragedy is that although Reading Borough Council has put in a bid for the wonderful building—we have also had an offer of help from Banksy, who put a mural on the wall of the gaol about 18 months ago, to enormous excitement, and there is the possibility of other support from philanthropists—unfortunately we do not have the go-ahead from the MOJ to start negotiating. It is instead working with a preferred bidder, which is sadly a commercial developer. The site has had a history of somewhat disappointing commercial bids constructed around the idea of gutting the old building or changing it dramatically, so we would sadly lose the history.

At the moment, people can walk into Oscar Wilde's cell and spend a moment there thinking about how he was treated, and about his amazing writing and his ability to turn what happened to him into incredibly powerful prose and poetry. If the gaol were changed dramatically, we would sadly lose that. That would be an utter tragedy not only for Reading but for people from across the world, who visit his house in Dublin and the cemetery in which he is buried in Paris. Sadly, a great piece of artistic heritage would be lost, and that would be a shame. It would be deeply disappointing for us and the country as a whole. I urge the MOJ to have another look and to reconsider how it manages procurement.

We have had a number of meetings, most recently towards the end of last week when the deputy leader of Reading Borough Council talked to the MOJ about this important issue, but it is still refusing to budge. We would like the MOJ to think about it deeply. We understand that under the Government procurement rules, a Department has to receive best value for selling off buildings and land. However, is it not possible to think about the wider context? We are not expecting any special favours; the MOJ just needs to look at it in the round and to see the possibility for this amazing building. We are hopeful that we will be able to offer a suitable sum to pay for the level of capital receipt needed for the site.

I urge the MOJ to think again and to work with Reading Borough Council, me, the right hon. Member for Reading West, and local arts and community groups to redevelop this wonderful site. The MOJ has spent a long time thinking about it, and the building was mothballed back in 2013, so in many ways it is high time for another look—indeed, it is somewhat overdue. In a meeting with the MOJ, the right hon. Member for Reading West made the point that if we consider the upkeep of the gaol during that time, a lot of money has sadly been lost to the public purse, because of how the MOJ mothballed it and has not been willing to engage in a more thoughtful discussion about its reuse.

As I am sure the Minister is only too aware, it is also Government policy to reuse historical buildings, and in a creative way. Other Departments, such as the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, are fully behind such an approach to heritage buildings, so I hope that, given the wider thrust of Government policy, it will be more than possible for the MOJ to look at this and to reconsider how the project is being discussed.

I will briefly mention one or two other community issues; they are also on heritage, given that I already spoke about social work in our community in the previous debate. I want to point out the potential as community buildings of some other, currently derelict sites in the Reading area, Cemetery Arch in particular. It is an amazing early Victorian building in the eastern part of our town that has the scope to be redeveloped and turned into something for the whole community. Proposals are being looked at the moment, and I thank residents and others who completed my survey.

We also have the exciting opportunity of the former BBC listening post. The hon. Member for Congleton might well be familiar with its work, because she is so abreast of foreign policy. Caversham Park was the site of BBC Monitoring. News of many recent historical events that happened in remote parts of the world was first broken from there, including—I know she is interested in Iranian society and history—the Islamic revolution in 1979. The very first reports of it were translated by Persian-speaking staff at the BBC.

The Caversham Park site has been empty for some time. Similar to the gaol, there is enormous potential for it to be redeveloped. Thankfully, there is a very sympathetic developer, Beechcroft Developments, which wants to use the old building as a piece of sheltered accommodation, together with flats for people who can look after themselves and are somewhat older. I support its efforts and those of Reading council to preserve the building, reuse it and turn it into something useful, with community access to the amazing parkland near the site.

My final local example on a similar theme is in Woodley, the other town in my constituency. Woodley was famous as the airfield where Douglas Bader was injured before world war two. It also featured in the war as an important site for manufacturing aircraft and for training of personnel. There is some scope for reusing some of the airfield buildings on the site and I thank the local volunteers taking part in that project.

I have talked a lot about local history in our area. To sum up, I point out the importance of community. I have been talking about one aspect of that. We are all are discussing different aspects of our local communities and the importance of them in our lives and our work. I thank you, Mr Vickers, for the opportunity to speak today. I could talk about many other things in my community, but I am sure other Members would prefer

[Matt Rodda]

that I did not. This has been a wonderful opportunity to talk about one aspect of life in Reading and Woodley, and I thank others for their contributions, which have been many and varied. I look forward to enjoying a happy Easter, and I wish a very happy Easter to all Members present.

3.39 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I have learned since coming into Parliament that there are many pleasant surprises in this place—indeed, your becoming the Chair during this debate, Mr Vickers, is one—and it is another pleasant surprise to see the Deputy Chief Whip, the Treasurer of His Majesty's Household, my right hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), here in Westminster Hall to respond to us. I am much more accustomed to seeing him sitting next to me as we fight for the A5 to be improved between Tamworth and Hinckley, in my patch.

Today, I will talk about my surprise at the constant phone calls I have received about the use of TikTok. There is no more timely or pleasant a surprise than to have at least an hour in which to talk about the ins and outs of TikTok. I come at the subject as someone without any technical expertise in digital programming, but with a curiosity and an appetite to keep up with the times and to try to hold on to my youth by picking up these tools. When Facebook first came out in the UK, I was on it, starting in 2004. I try to use these kinds of tools to find out a little bit more about them, which I find interesting.

With so much going on with TikTok, the likes of social media and, of course, artificial intelligence, we as a society are left in a very interesting place as to how we should deal with these things. I am privileged enough to be able to ask questions of the people who matter and to try to come up with some ideas about how we can deal with such issues. Over the next hour—well, probably the next five minutes—I will talk a little bit about my background, including how I became interested in this area, what I see at the moment and the way I see things going in the future.

I came into this area through my work on body image. Many Members will know that I campaign about social media and the warped sense that we create around the body, particularly body proportions—simply, scaling up biceps, slimming down waists, making breasts larger—in our pursuit of what we as a society deem beautiful. This also has an impact on mental health. More recently, my work has led me to consider the use of steroids. We know that there are between 500,000 and 1 million people in the UK using steroids, mainly to try to fit an aspiration of what they want to look like. Such issues lead to huge problems societally, from people simply feeling bullied or not good enough, which leads to anxiety, depression and—in the worst cases—to suicide, eating disorders, and heart attacks and strokes if they are addicted to steroids.

Social media has a lot to answer for. I knew nothing about TikTok when I came into Parliament. I did not meet TikTok representatives until, after I had met Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, they offered to meet me during the pandemic. I thought that I needed to know a little bit more about what TikTok was, because, like many people, I assumed that it was just people—particularly young women—dancing and talking. How wrong could I have been?

TikTok is an incredible community, because it is so varied and diverse. It is no wonder that at least 16 million people in the UK use it and that it is still growing very fast. The reason for that is the ability to seek knowledge and to learn very, very quickly on such a user-friendly platform. It is engaging, exciting and really easy to use. That is where I saw an opportunity, from my side, to try to explain the role of Parliament. What do we do on a daily basis? How is legislation introduced? Why do we only shake each other's hand once? Why do we turn round in Prayers? What even are Prayers? How do we form an opinion? What does a Committee look like? How does a piece of legislation go through? What does a parliamentary private secretary do? I have shared videos on all those subjects. There is even the question of how we decide where we sit, when we sit and what that looks like. There is a huge amount of public fascination out there with how we deal with and what we do in our niche, which is politics.

To give Members an idea of how powerful TikTok is, a simple video about how people sit in Parliament and where the Speaker is was seen by 750,000 people. However, it goes even further than that. During the tributes to the Queen, I was the 274th speaker out of the 283 speakers on the day, sitting there for 10 hours, explaining that and reading a poem that had gone viral on social media. My video about all that has been seen by 1.9 million people. That is the power of this app.

TikTok is so user-friendly is because it is easy to interact, to duet or to stitch—that is, people can made videos straight away with someone else when they are both looking at TikTok. That is the beauty of it, but, of course, that in itself is part of the problem.

Where does that leave us now? In the last few weeks, I have seen a lot of concern and caution, and hype and hysteria. That came out particularly in the congressional hearing in America. I have not watched all four or five hours of the CEO taking questions, but having spent three years on a Select Committee, I have some understanding of how those questions are formulated, the briefings and what people are trying to elicit. What struck me was that lack of understanding from some on the panel and the lack of clarity from the tech companies that were answering the questions.

What do I mean by that? For hon. Members who have never used these apps, some of the questions might seem quite silly, but they have a serious undertone. It is important to ask how the apps connect to the wi-fi, but a child would know that apps need to connect to the wi-fi. The question underneath that needs to be: once it is connected to the wi-fi, what else can it connect to?

One of the questioners asked about following pupils and using facial recognition. The CEO is completely right to say that they need that to map pupils to know where the sunglasses go. Anyone who has played with the app, particularly the "bold glamour" filter, which has gone viral, will know that it is incredibly powerful in changing one's shape and the way one looks in a very subtle way. Naturally, the technology needs to be able to pick up those facial points to be able to do that, so the CEO was correct to say that the app follows the user's face. The question is, what happens with that data? When is it being done, and when else is the company

using it? Those questions were not answered in that hearing. In my private meetings, I cannot get answers to those kinds of questions. There lies the concern. This is not just aimed at TikTok; it relates to Instagram and Snapchat—all the platforms have a similar problem. When we flick on and load up an app, it asks for permission to use the microphone or camera, and we have to do that to interact with the app, but to what end, how far and what does that mean? That is the crux.

I will bypass the issue of where the data goes and TikTok being owned by ByteDance—frankly, even as a politician, I do not know whether the Chinese Communist party has access to that data. After listening to the hearing, I am not sure that anyone else is quite sure either. Those are some of the obscurities in the debate. We need to think much more about what we need to know, what can be done with this technology and, more importantly, what is being done with it. The realms of possibility and probability are very different.

That comes down to managing risk. The public and, indeed, politicians have a particularly poor grasp of the difference between absolute and relative risk. As a GP, I spent a lot of my time dealing with this issue. If I told someone that the risk of taking the contraceptive pill had gone up twofold, they would panic, but if I told them that it had gone up from one in 20,000 to two in 20,000, that is not as scary. We need to know the absolute and relative risks of using this data, and for whom.

It is right for the Government to ban an app on Government devices if the risk is high, given the fact that the Prime Minister is probably a high-value target, but does that apply to a teenager who is watching educational videos? We simply do not know, and that is the problem for someone sitting in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and trying to find the answers to such questions. By shining a light on this issue and having this debate, I hope that we can get some transparency on what is going on with our data, what it looks like and what the capabilities are.

That leads me on to where we should be going in the future. We are at the forefront of the AI technology revolution. In this debate at Christmas, I delivered the first speech written by OpenAI with ChatGPT. We are already on the fourth iteration of ChatGPT. For hon. Members who do not know what that means, it is quite literally able to design an app by looking at something written on a napkin. It will deliver speeches. It will write copy. Many MPs may well be using it to answer hundreds of items of correspondence and give their opinions, because it can source data from across the internet, condense it all and use it in a practicable way. It is fundamentally changing the way in which we as society use this data.

Some Members may have seen that Elon Musk has put out a letter saying that we should pause AI development for six months because of the dangers of AI. Now, I think that is probably an exaggeration, but he makes a point for this House to consider: we need to think very hard and very quickly about how we can ensure that AI development is done safely, but in a way that does not stifle innovation and investment or stop the UK being one of the world leaders in this field.

I am pleased to see the Government bringing forward Data Protection and Digital Information (No. 2) Bill and their AI White Paper. Fundamentally, underneath this whole issue are two parts: data and algorithms. The sheer scale of the data we can draw on means that inherent biases are built in and no one can give an answer as to why an algorithm has made its decision. With some probability, they will be able to say it is likely to have made a decision, but if it is scouring the entirety of the Department for Work and Pensions' records across the Department's existence to decide the right amount of support someone should receive without rigorous human oversight, we are going to be in real trouble. Imagine that happening with passport applications or applications to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and even into the financial world and back into social media.

This is all happening at pace right in front of our eyes. We, as the public and as legislators, need to better understand what data we have, who it is about and who it is for, why we are using it and how long we are going to allow people to do that. While that will start to help with transparency, for the algorithms themselves we need much more accountability regarding who uses them and how they are used. When I put this to the likes of TikTok, Facebook or anyone else in the click-based economy, I am simply told, "It's commercially sensitive," or, "We have a team. It's very complicated and difficult over here." That simply is not good enough, because either maliciously or by accident people are being sent huge amounts of content and we rely more and more on algorithms.

To my mind, as a simple person who has stepped into this with no expertise but with the privilege of having the opportunity to ask questions to those who lead and think in this field, there is space for a regulator of algorithms to link the issue to data—not in every single Department or looking into every single niche, but to try to bring this all together. There is a danger that if we outsource this issue to the finance world, or have specific ones for social media or health, they may diverge. We need the specialisms in how this works, but we also need to work in a similar fashion to the way the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency dealt with the vaccines: we must regulate as we move forward at the pace of industry. If we can do that now that we have the Brexit benefits of being free to set our own regulation, we have a real opportunity to set the course for the rest of the world on this area.

To come full circle, I will follow the Government guidance and keep using TikTok. We must think very carefully about how we should secure and use our data, but, of course, as that advice changes as we learn more, we should all take that on board. We should all think very carefully about what we are doing and make those changes accordingly.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I now call the SNP spokesperson, Chris Stephens.

3.53 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as there will be a number of topics where that will be relevant.

First of all, I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for opening the debate and doing his best impersonation of Sir David Amess, who was a

[Chris Stephens]

great man. He was always one of the highlights of these Adjournment debates, as he often managed to go through 47 issues in his allotted time, which meant 47 press releases during the recess in the Southend newspapers. I even found myself in those newspapers through one of my exchanges with Sir David, which is probably one of the pinnacles of my parliamentary career so far.

I thank everyone else who has contributed. A couple of issues have leapt out for me. The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) reminds us that there are still injustices that affect the LGBTQ community, and I thank her for raising those issues. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) continues to raise issues of persecution and religion. I really enjoyed the excellent speech from the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) on the history of Oscar Wilde in gaol and all of that.

The hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) talked about body image. I regularly attend secondary school citizenship events, where school pupils present issues of concern to elected Members, and body image comes up on every single occasion. There is always a group of young girls who have an art project and want something to be done about issues to do with body image. It is very encouraging that young women are doing that.

The thread running through many of our debates over the last few weeks is that, frankly, the cost of living crisis is still biting. It is still affecting far too many in society, and the economy is struggling. The Resolution Foundation recently published a report that shows that after 15 years of stagnation and austerity, workers are £11,000 a year worse off than in our European neighbours. That is a staggering statistic—one that all of us should contemplate in our recess. I should say at this moment to those watching that it is a recess, not a holiday; there is a big difference between the two. Ipsos MORI polling of 6,000 adults suggested that two thirds think the UK economy is going to get worse in the year ahead; it also found that one in four are struggling on their current income, and nearly half are worried about their financial situation.

I have always believed that, as an elected representative, I have a duty and a responsibility to try to tackle some of these issues. That is why I work with Feeding Britain and Good Food Scotland. We have now opened three larders, and will be opening a mobile larder, in Glasgow South West: we have one in the Linthouse area, one in the Cardonald area, and we have the Threehills larder, which in June will become Scotland's first community supermarket. This work is about giving people the opportunity to buy food at cost and helping them to make their money stretch a bit more, as well as providing wraparound services, so that people can get help on related issues. For example, there are staggering statistics that show that many of our constituents across these islands are not claiming pension credit. We all have a responsibility to deal with these issues. I encourage the Government to keep pushing and to make sure that those who are entitled to support get it.

I am glad that the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch, is listening to me, as this also leads me on to some of the other issues and hobby horses that I have been raising for a long time. Universal credit deductions are a nonsense. There is this nonsensical position where people are either told they have to wait five weeks for their first universal credit payment or they can get a loan after two weeks. It is a loan; Government Ministers keep telling me it is an advance, but when someone is given money and they are expected to pay it back, that meets the dictionary definition of a loan.

How we got into this situation, where far too many people who are struggling are paying back through deductions over a long period, really needs to be addressed. I encourage them to go through the report of the Work and Pensions Committee, which recommended that the starter payment should be paid within two weeks. I would be very interested—I anticipate an intervention from the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, for example—to know the costs of the whole administrative exercise of the deductions system.

Dame Meg Hillier: The hon. Gentleman prompts me to raise a concern. What he highlights is something that we often raise on the Committee. There can be a Whitehall decision on what a policy looks like, but once it hits real people's lives, the picture can be very different. He and I would probably agree that we need to see much more understanding of real people's lives when policy is being made. Whitehall can seem very distant from our constituencies, and this is a case in point.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words. It is the duty of every parliamentarian to speak truth to power and to highlight real-life experiences, because that is the only way we can make policy better.

That brings me to the issue of sanctions on those who are going through the social security system. We have seen a huge increase in the number of sanctions. How do we know that? We know from parliamentary questions that I tabled in November 2022, which gave statistics that showed that sanctions were ramping up incredibly.

Dame Meg Hillier: The hon. Member raises a very important issue. The Public Accounts Committee has looked at sanctions, which do not do what Government Ministers often think they do. They are actually ineffective. There are other ways to encourage people into work, but sanctions are a blunt instrument that does not work.

Chris Stephens: I agree, and I think the Government should look at providing incentives rather than having a blunt instrument approach of harming people with sanctions.

It will not surprise those of us on the Opposition Benches that when I recently tabled a parliamentary question to get an update on the figure for sanctions, to see whether the numbers had increased again since November, I received a response that many Opposition Members will be familiar with. The Government said that they were no longer going to provide the figures, because to publish them would be at disproportionate cost—yes, our old friend "disproportionate cost". That tells me that there is a huge increase in sanctions, so much so that they can only be published at disproportionate cost. What an absolute, complete and utter nonsense and outrage. I anticipate another intervention from the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

Dame Meg Hillier: I point the hon. Gentleman to the National Audit Office, which has access to a lot of data that often the Government do not necessarily wish to put in the public domain. It has complete access rights. I am shocked that the Government will not release information on sanctions. It is actually a vital piece of management information that we should have.

Chris Stephens: Absolutely, and I hope that the Government will reconsider.

There is one last issue that I want to raise, because I am conscious of the time. As chair of the PCS Parliamentary Group, I hope that the Government will start to negotiate with their own workers and their own workers' trade unions, particularly the PCS. The Government are alienating their own workforce. The same workers who were applauded as heroes during the pandemic now find themselves with an employer that is seeming to dig its heels in during the worst cost of living crisis in recent memory.

In the coming weeks, there is going to be strike action at the Passport Office, the Animal and Plant Health Agency, Ofgem, the British Museum, the British Library and the Government Digital Service, and further UK-wide action will take place at the end of April. I hope Ministers see that it is not a sustainable position when so many workers feel they have been so mistreated over pay, pensions and other issues that many—indeed, 130,000 civil servants—are having to take industrial action. I hope that the Government will put real and new money on the table to resolve those issues.

As the hon. Member for Harrow East reminded us, it is not just Easter coming up; other celebrations of other religions are going on, such as Passover and Eid. I hope that all hon. Members from across the House have a good recess and do the great work that we all try to do for our constituents.

4.4 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for leading today's debate. As always, we have discussed a great range of issues. It has been a really interesting debate, and I am certainly learning a lot. It is good to see the pre-recess Adjournment debate on tour here in Westminster Hall, although I hope that we get back into the main Chamber in the future.

I will start with a short apology to the pupils at Caldicot School. I was originally due to be with them this afternoon for their Easter musical "Back to the '80s", which was the decade in which I misspent my youth. I am sorry to miss it, and I send my good luck to them. To follow on that theme, I know that the Conservative party is often keen to turn the clock back to the 1980s, but I am proud to represent a party that looks to the future under the leadership of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). Whether it be making our streets safer, kickstarting a green industrial strategy with support for things such as steel, which is important in my constituency, or breaking down the barriers to opportunity at every stage and working for sustained growth in the G7, we have a confident vision for the modernisation of our economy and our public services to prepare Britain for the years ahead.

Speaking of looking ahead, I know many of us will be looking ahead to Easter, as will the congregations of the churches and chapels in my constituency of Newport East, who will be gathering to celebrate the most important time of the Christian calendar. I put on record my thanks to the Christian congregations across my constituency for all they do. In doing so, I praise the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for all her work as the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. In her contribution to the previous debate this afternoon, she raised some important cases. It was fascinating and valuable to hear about her work, and I hope that the Minister takes up the points raised in the Truro review.

Last weekend, I hosted a surgery at St Julian's Methodist Church. It is one of several churches running warm hubs in my constituency, offering people the chance to stay warm. These kinds of initiatives run by volunteers typify the way our churches continue to offer people help and hope. They offer a helping hand during worrying times in a cost of living crisis, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said. We have a host of initiatives across our communities, with campaigns on behalf of vulnerable and persecuted people across the world, including the many persecuted Christians in Africa and Asia who will be unable to worship in freedom this Easter.

I will highlight one project before referring to other hon. Members' speeches. The Sanctuary Project is based at Bethel Community Church in the constituency of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). She is not present today, but had she been she probably would have spoken in the previous debate. Sanctuary is another example of that kind of community work. Run by the brilliant Mark Seymour and Sarah Croft, it offers practical support, advocacy and friendships to refugees and asylum seekers in Newport. With the team last week, I met one of the Afghan interpreters who has settled in Newport—we have had a community for quite a while now. The interpreter outlined to me just how many brave interpreters who worked with the Ministry of Defence and have been accepted under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy are still waiting in UK-sourced accommodation in Pakistan, all these months on. They are awaiting entry clearance visas, which can be issued by only the Home Office. With no income or right to work in Pakistan, some are resorting to the treacherous small boats journeys that we have talked so much about to claim asylum in the UK, in the hope of having a quicker journey. The same is true of some former Afghan military personnel who were trained by and worked with the UK forces. It is in the UK's moral and security interests to address this dire situation 18 months on.

Volunteers at the Sanctuary Project are dismayed by the Illegal Migration Bill. I also had lots of letters about it this week from year 5 pupils at Lliswerry Primary School in Newport, who are fundraising for the Sanctuary Project. It was disappointing that the Government voted down the amendments to the Bill this week, including the amendments on improving support for victims of modern slavery, removing the Home Secretary's power to detain and remove unaccompanied children, and the creation of a new national crime agency unit to crack down on the smuggler gangs. I hope that the Government will think again in the Bill's remaining stages.

[Jessica Morden]

The hon. Member for Harrow East mentioned response times. The end of term presents an opportunity for the Government to reflect on their responsiveness to communication from hon. Members—whether that be in the form of oral or written questions, or correspondence to Ministers in the hotlines that we and our staff use. I have raised the issue of responsiveness in previous Adjournment debates as shadow Deputy Leader. There has been some improvement in some Departments. Notably, the Department for Health and Social Care picked up in 2022 after a pretty dismal record in 2021.

However, we know that others are still lagging behind or not disclosing up-to-date information on how quickly they respond to inquiries and questions from MPs. The Home Office is one prominent example, but there are so many Departments, including the DWP, the MOJ and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, that say they are committed to increasing response times—even that they are undertaking regular training with the parliamentary capability team—but will not provide up-to-date information on responsiveness to us. We are a few months too late for new year's resolutions, but a commitment to greater Government transparency going forward would be most welcome.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West mentioned that away from the workings of Westminster, as I am sure we will all be aware, people up and down the country are still experiencing a very real cost of living crisis. He was quite right to quote and highlight the figure from the Resolution Foundation that people are £11,000 worse off since 2010.

It is always difficult to pull together the full range of contributions, but I will say to the hon. Member for Harrow East—as mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West—that he did indeed live up to the record of the late, great and wonderful Sir David Amess in this debate. He talked about the excellent facilities in Harrow and antisocial behaviour. That allows me the opportunity to say that building up really good neighbourhood policing teams, which is a Labour promise in the next general election, is very important. My force has been cut by 40% since 2010, and Operation Uplift is possibly just bringing us up to where we were when we were cut. It is really important that we do that. The hon. Member for Harrow East also represents a diverse community, and it is always interesting to hear about a range of issues, not least the suggestion of a GCSE in Romanian.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) spoke about the tragic case of Rasharn, sending love to his family, and about the need to learn lessons in record keeping. I really hope that that particular issue for Rasharn's mother is taken up by the Minister in his closing remarks, as well as the awful case of historical discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. That is completely unacceptable. My hon. Friend has done a good service to her constituents in raising that today, as well as the issue of housing.

That issue was also mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who gave a really compelling case for an arts-based solution for using Reading jail. It is an excellent idea, and I wish him well with that campaign. It reflects the importance of preserving the significance of our historic buildings; for instance, in Newport we have the Westgate Hotel, the home of the 1839 Chartist uprising, where our Chartists fought for democracy. I think we all share that view about saving those really important buildings.

I have been to the drop-ins of the hon. Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on body image. I am most grateful to him for the work he does, not least as the parent of two teenage children who use social media. He does a great service there, and he made some really important comments about TikTok. There are questions with that going forwards, which I am sure will be heard. His was indeed the first AI speech, but it was quite amusing watching my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan); he had done precisely the same thing, but the hon. Member for Bosworth got there first.

Finally, I wish everyone across the House and all staff on the Estate a very happy Easter. I know it is a special time for many other traditions, too. I met recently with the Kurdish-Turkish community in Newport and celebrated Newroz at the weekend. The Muslim community is currently observing Ramadan, and I am going to various iftars next week, and the Jewish community will soon be marking Passover. I hope that wherever we are and however we are commemorating the days and weeks ahead, we all have a restful but constructive working recess, and I will see everyone in April.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I ask him to allow Mr Blackman a minute at the end to wind up.

4.13 pm

The Treasurer of His Majesty's Household (Mr Marcus Jones): Thank you for your guidance, Mr Vickers; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the excellent speech with which he opened the debate. It was absolutely in the spirit of the late, great Sir David Amess; I think he would have thought that you did him proud. My hon. Friend did say that he would not have as many subjects as Sir David, but I think that is possibly not the case, if I may mention that. I will endeavour to answer as many of his points as possible, and those made by other Members, in the time that I have available.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned Harrow Council. It is excellent to hear about the great job that it is doing on the activities and support for children across the holidays and on the upgrading of tennis courts and other sports facilities. We all know that Conservative councils deliver better value services and cost the council tax payer an average £80 less, so I hope that in this year's local elections the Conservatives will be supported on the basis of quality services, lower council tax and the value for money that they provide.

Antisocial behaviour is a scourge on communities across the country. I am glad to hear about the public space protection orders in Harrow. That fits very well with the Government's work on antisocial behaviour, which includes increasing the penalties for fly-tipping and the ban on laughing gas. Not only do many people suffer the effects of canisters being strewn across playgrounds, pavements and roadsides, but laughing gas is an extremely dangerous thing to use.

My hon. Friend also mentioned ULEZ, which is hurting his most disadvantaged constituents and many others across London. The Mayor of London does not

seem to be listening to residents, and it is pretty scandalous given the 9.5% increase in the precept that he has put forward this year. I heard what my hon. Friend said about the Home Office as well. It is good to hear about the improvement in casework—long may that continue. I have found that that seems to be the case as well. He also mentioned the Romanian diaspora.

Dame Meg Hillier: The Minister raises the issue of Home Office responses. Many of us deal with the Home Office—I am one of the top six customers on behalf of my constituents. One reason why there has been a degree of improvement is that our constituents get the opportunity to meet caseworkers one to one, face to face. Although that is a welcome temporary stopgap, it is not a sustainable way for the Government to operate, so does the Minister acknowledge that there still needs to be a lot of work done to improve the process? I have constituents who have been waiting years for responses.

Mr Marcus Jones: There is always work that needs to be done, and a significant amount of investment is going into that.

To go back to the Romanian diaspora in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, he spends a massive amount of time supporting various diasporas in his constituency, and I know that they are very grateful for that. I am sure he will continue to press the case of the Romanian GCSE.

In terms of private Members' Bills, my hon. Friend will recall the success that we had with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. I took that through for the Government and was proud to do so in support of my hon. Friend's private Member's Bill. It has made a big difference to people that face homelessness and the risk of homelessness. I understand what he says about rogue landlords, and I hope that his private Member's Bill will fly through the House of Lords.

He mentioned the Indian trade deal—I think talks are continuing on that. It will massively boost trade between our countries. He also mentioned smoking prevalence and what we can do to reduce that, but it is at a record low of 13%. I have never even tried a cigarette or any form of smoking, but I acknowledge the damage that it can do. We have the independent Khan review of 2022 and Ministers are in the process of considering a response to that.

I was very sorry to hear about the tragic and sad death of Rasharn Williams in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier). My condolences certainly go to Lorna Williams and her family and friends, and the friends of Rasharn. It seems like a terrible situation and extremely tragic. There are procedures in place for schools to support pupils with medical conditions. The statutory guidance is clear that governing bodies should ensure that written records are kept of all medicines administered to children, and that the school's policy sets out procedures to be followed when it is notified that a pupil has a medical condition and that it covers the role in individual healthcare plans. I certainly hear what the hon. Lady says and will make sure that her comments are fed back to the Leader of the House of Commons, so that they can be followed up on. Hopefully another meeting can be arranged with the Schools Minister. That would be important and worthwhile.

The hon. Lady mentioned a constituent who has been severely disadvantaged because of his inability to serve in the diplomatic service because of the completely misguided perception that LGBT people were more susceptible to blackmail and would therefore pose a security risk. That is an awful case, and I commend her for taking it up. In terms of what can be done now, there are a number of issues that would go across a lot of Departments. I will therefore try to find out who the best person would be to engage on that issue and will ask the relevant Minister to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this important case—a sign of previous times rather than times today, thankfully.

On lifts, the hon. Lady mentioned an awful example. Providers of lifts should provide better support to their customers. As a Conservative, I think the more choice we have in being able to procure such items and the more resilience there is, the better. I am sure the Minister responsible for that area will consider her comments.

On the renters' reform Bill, as the hon. Lady knows that will come forward in due course. While there are real challenges with housing, 632,600 affordable homes have been built since 2010 and the Government have a £11.5 billion fund for an affordable homes programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) is a passionate advocate for freedom of religion and religious rights. She is a passionate envoy for the Prime Minister. She mentioned that she wants to become an ambassador. For me to confirm that position today would be slightly above my pay grade, so I will not do that at this point, but I commend her and her team, particularly our friend David Burrowes, who was a valued Member of this place just a few years ago. It was good to hear about the education element of the work she does in galvanising young people to speak out about religious persecution. It was sad to hear the case about the young man who was sentenced after he sang a song and put it on social media. Clearly, the Foreign Office takes up such cases on a regular basis, but it would be interesting to speak further with my hon. Friend on that case, perhaps after the debate.

In terms of the implementation of the Bishop of Truro's review, I hear what my hon. Friend said, and the passion with which she said it, in particular when it came to recommendation 6. I will speak to the Leader of the House and ask that a follow-up meeting is arranged for my hon. Friend so that she can take up those concerns with the Minister responsible.

What the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) said about the project in his constituency, which he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Sir Alok Sharma) are trying to get up and running, sounded like an interesting prospect. I am someone who wants to protect heritage and bring heritage buildings back into use. I could not quite picture what the hon. Member was describing until he mentioned "Porridge", which was one of the best comedy series, probably ever. That gave me a picture in my mind of the type of building we are talking about. It was great to hear his passion and to hear about the link to Oscar Wilde, who served his sentence there.

As I understand it, at the time Oscar Wilde was sentenced, the phrase "the love that dare not speak its name" was quoted. That is clearly something that we would not recognise today. It therefore sounds fitting—if I can put it that way—that the suggested project is one

[Mr Marcus Jones]

for community, arts and the LGBT+ community. Clearly there is a decision to be made by the MOJ, and I am not in a position to give a view on that. I will ask the Leader of the House to ask the MOJ Minister responsible to get back to the hon. Member for Reading East and my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) made a fleeting reference to our local campaign about the A5—I will not mention that again today. He mentioned a lot about TikTok and other social media sites and made some really serious points about body image and the challenges around that. The work that he is doing on that front is well recognised in this place. He also made good points about how those companies use the information that they glean when someone signs up or uses such apps. There are lots of unanswered questions, which is why the Government have decided not to allow the use of TikTok on Government mobile devices. That is the right thing to do until those questions are answered. My hon. Friend also mentioned AI; the Government White paper sets out clearly the work the Government are doing to ensure that people are protected, while trying to bring forward a technology that could make a massively positive difference to our economy.

Very quickly, in the time I have left I will touch on the fact that the cost of living was mentioned by the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden). We are providing £94 billion to support the cost of living. We are raising the state pension by a record level in cash terms. It is the 13th year that fuel duty has been frozen; we have actually cut fuel duty by 5p this year, saving people £200. The Government are doing everything they can, but the best thing we can do is bring inflation down. *[Interruption.]* The Chair is asking me to finish, so on that basis I wish everybody a happy Easter and I wish well all the other religions that are taking part in religious ceremonies in April.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Mr Blackman has 32 seconds.

4.29 pm

Bob Blackman: Thank you, Mr Vickers, for your chairmanship of this debate; no doubt you would have liked to have participated in it. I thank everyone who has contributed; it demonstrates the value of these debates, which allow Members to raise a whole range of subjects within the timeframe. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests. On many of the issues that I mentioned, I am the chair of their respective all-party parliamentary groups. I wish everyone a very happy and relaxing time away from this place; I hope everyone comes back refreshed, whatever their faith.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 30 March 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Correspondence from MPs and Peers: 2022 Data

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I am today publishing reports on the performance of Departments and agencies based on substantive replies to correspondence received from Members of Parliament and peers in 2022. While individual Departments and agencies are accountable for their own performance, the Cabinet Office is publishing this data to improve transparency and highlight where the Government have handled correspondence effectively.

The footnotes to the table provide general background information on how the figures have been compiled or how they have been affected by departmental restructuring.

The Government attach great importance to the effective and timely handling of correspondence, and recognise that the right of parliamentarians to take up issues with those in Government underlines our accountability as Ministers.

A copy of these reports will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses in Parliament.

[HCWS701]

Use of Non-corporate Communication Channels: Guidance

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State (Oliver Dowden): The Government are today publishing new guidance on the use of non-corporate communication channels for Government business. This supersedes the 2013 guidance to departments on the use of private email.

The new guidance is aimed at ensuring that the Government can use non-corporate communication channels when appropriate while considering the record-keeping, transparency, security and data protection implications. It takes account of the Information Commissioner's report ("Behind the screens - maintaining government transparency and data security in the age of messaging apps").

I have requested that a copy of using non-corporate communication channels (e.g. WhatsApp, private email, SMS) for Government business be deposited in the Libraries of the Houses of Parliament. The guidance will be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS703]

Nuclear Test Medal Eligibility Criteria

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): Alongside my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary, I am pleased to provide details on the eligibility criteria for the commemorative Nuclear Test Medal to the House today. This follows the announcement by the Prime Minister on 21 November 2022 regarding the introduction of the medal.

This important step moves us closer to recognising the work of those civilians and veterans who played a critical role in establishing the UK's nuclear deterrent and contributing to our enduring international security.

The medal will be awarded to eligible UK service and civilian personnel, and individuals from Commonwealth nations, who served at the locations where the UK atmospheric nuclear tests were conducted, including the preparatory and clear-up phases, between 1952 and 1967 inclusive. The qualifying period for the medal is defined as "service of any length".

The full eligibility criteria will be published today on gov.uk together with information on how veterans, civilians and their next of kin can apply.

With regard to the design of the medal, the Royal Mint Advisory Committee has commissioned designs and will present its recommendations in April 2023. Following approval of the design by His Majesty The King, we expect the first medals to be available for award by late summer 2023. Priority will be given to those veterans and civilians applying for their own medal.

I have requested that a copy of the eligibility criteria for the medal be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS693]

TREASURY

Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): My noble friend the Treasury Lords Minister, Baroness Penn, has today made the following written ministerial statement.

> In January, Treasury Ministers commissioned an internal review to assess how legal fees licence applications are considered. Following this review, I am updating the House on its findings.
>
> Since the unlawful invasion of Ukraine, we have taken decisive action to sanction Vladimir Putin and those who support his regime. With partners, we have implemented the strongest set of economic sanctions ever imposed on a major economy. We have designated over 1300 individuals and over 140 entities including over 130 oligarchs with global assets worth over £145 billion.
>
> The sanctions regime is governed by the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 which was considered by Parliament between October 2017 and May 2018. It gained Royal Assent on 23 May 2018. The Act empowers HM Treasury to issue licences which permit activities otherwise prohibited by sanctions, including for payment of legal fees. In the case of legal fees, the law requires that the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation's decision-making must carefully balance between the right to legal representation—which is a fundamental one—with wider issues, including the aim and purpose of the sanctions. While some legal claims may be unfounded, it is for the courts to decide whether their claims should be permitted to succeed—not the Government. The review confirmed this position.
>
> The Government are clear, however, that our courts and legal system must not be used by those seeking to silence investigations in the public interest. We are committed therefore to bringing forward legislation to tackling strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs). This will include a statutory definition of SLAPPs, an early dismissal process, and costs protection for SLAPPs cases. The Government have committed to primary legislation to make these reforms

a reality as soon as parliamentary time allows. These changes will help to uphold our fundamental liberties of free speech and a free press, end the abuse of our courts, and defend those who bravely speak out in the public interest.

As a result of the review the Government are committed to further targeted changes to the process for issuing legal fees licences that safeguard the sanctions regime against the risk of manipulation and ensure that Ministers are accountable for OFSI decision-making.

Our approach to date reflects the fact that the right to legal representation is a fundamental one and it is therefore important that designated persons are still able to access legal representation. However, in this context, it is the Government's view that in most cases, the use of frozen funds for payment of legal professional fees for defamation cases is not an appropriate use of funds, and in many cases will be against the public interest. While still reviewing each individual application on a case-by-case basis (for both appropriateness and compliance with the right to a fair hearing), OFSI will, in future, take a presumption that legal fees relating to defamation and similar cases will be rejected. The Russian and Belarussian legal services general licence will also be amended so that it no longer authorises legal fees for defamation and similar cases. Any person or entity that acts without a specific licence where the activity is not covered by the general licence, will be in breach of financial sanctions and liable for a monetary penalty or, if egregious enough, criminal prosecution.

To strengthen the decision-making framework for specific licence applications in these and other cases, the Government have further updated the delegation framework under which decisions are taken by OFSI rather than Ministers. This framework will support and reinforce scrutiny of licensing decisions by making clear when it is appropriate for Ministers to take these decisions personally, or where officials can take these decisions. A copy of the updated delegation framework will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The UK remains committed to stopping Putin's unlawful invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions have been, and continue to be, a critical tool to holding those who support Putin's regime to account. We have taken decisive action to freeze the assets on 23 major Russian banks holding over £960 billion, and with partners immobilised over 60% of Russia's foreign reserves. The changes I have announced today to the decisions the Government take to sanctions and licences, support our efforts to oppose this barbaric war.

[HCWS700]

Oil and Gas Decommissioning Relief Deeds

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge): The Government's fiscal approach for oil and gas aims to balance encouraging investment with ensuring a fair return for the nation in exchange for the use of its resources. Following the introduction of the energy (oil and gas) profits levy in May last year, the UK currently has a headline tax rate of 75% on profits from oil and gas production, one of the highest tax rates for oil and gas across comparable countries around the world.

At Budget 2013, the Government announced they would begin signing decommissioning relief deeds. These deeds represented a new contractual approach to provide oil and gas companies with certainty on the level of tax relief they will receive on future decommissioning costs.

Since October 2013, the Government have entered into 105 decommissioning relief deeds. Offshore Energies UK estimates that these deeds have so far unlocked approximately £10 billion of capital, which can now be invested elsewhere.

The Government committed to report to Parliament annually on progress with the decommissioning relief deeds. The report for financial year 2021-22 is provided below.

Number of decommissioning relief agreements entered into: the Government entered into three decommissioning relief agreements in 2021-22.

Total number of decommissioning relief agreements in force at the end of that year: 101 decommissioning relief agreements were in force at the end of the year.

Number of payments made under any decommissioning relief agreements during that year, and the amount of each payment: two payments were made under a decommissioning relief agreement in 2021-22, for £46.6 million in total. These were made in relation to the provision recognised by HM Treasury in 2015, as a result of a company defaulting on its decommissioning obligations.

Total number of payments that have been made under any decommissioning relief agreements as at the end of that year, and the total amount of those payments: 10 payments have been made under any decommissioning relief agreement as at the end of the 2022-22 financial year, totalling £244.3 million.

Estimate of the maximum amount liable to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements: the Government have not made any changes to the tax regime that would generate a liability to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements. HM Treasury's 2022-23 accounts will recognise a provision currently estimated to be £102.1 million in respect of decommissioning expenditure incurred as a result of a company defaulting on their decommissioning obligations[1]. The majority of this is expected to be realised over the next two years.

[1] This figure takes into account payments made subsequent to the financial year covered by this written ministerial statement and may be updated to reflect newer information.

[HCWS699]

Public Service Pensions: Superannuation Contributions Discount Rate

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): SCAPE—superannuation contributions adjusted for past experience—is the process for setting employer contribution rates at valuations of unfunded public service pension schemes. As part of the SCAPE process, the SCAPE discount rate is used alongside many other factors such as earnings changes, changes to life expectancy and demographic assumptions to determine the appropriate employer contribution rate. Valuations as at 31 March 2020 are currently under way and will result in new employer contribution rates which will be implemented from April 2024.

The current methodology for setting the discount rate, based on the OBR's forecast of long-term GDP growth, was adopted in 2011. At the time, the Government expressed an intention to review the discount rate methodology every 10 years. A 2021 consultation met this intention and sought views on the most appropriate methodology for setting the SCAPE discount rate.

The Government have today published their response to the June 2021 consultation on the methodology used to set the SCAPE discount rate and have concluded that the existing methodology best meets the balance of the Government's objectives for the SCAPE discount rate, and therefore do not intend to modify the methodology.[1]

The SCAPE discount rate to be used as part of the ongoing 2020 valuations will therefore be based on the expected long-term GDP growth figures, published by the OBR in July 2022. Based on these figures, the new SCAPE discount rate is CPI+1.7% p.a.

The Government are aware that the updated SCAPE discount rate will generally lead to higher employer contribution rates for most unfunded public service pension schemes resulting from the 2020 valuations. In recognition of the cost pressure that an increase to the employer contribution rate would bring to existing departmental budgets, the Government have committed to providing funding for increases in employer contribution rates resulting from the 2020 valuations as a consequence of changes to the SCAPE discount rate; this commitment is for employers whose employment costs are centrally funded through departmental expenditure. These funds will be used to pay for employer contributions and therefore will contribute to meeting the costs of public service pensions provision which means this will be cost neutral for the Exchequer.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/public-service-pensions-consultation-on-the-discount-rate-methodology.

[HCWS697]

Scottish Government and Welsh Government Funding

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): In addition to changes in funding at supplementary estimates 2022-23, and in line with the statement of funding policy, the Welsh Government are switching £65.000 million from resource DEL to capital DEL (general).

The Scottish Government have also been provided with an additional £16.300 million resource DEL in relation to the implementation of international financial reporting standard 16 (IFRS16).

Revised 2022-23 funding is as follows:

£ million	Scottish Government	Welsh Government
Resource DEL excluding depreciation[1]	36,009.512	15,576.221
Capital DEL (general)	6,063.628	2,694.523
Capital DEL (financial transactions)	348.742	194.714
Total DEL	42,421.882	18,465.457

[1]Due to the scale of tax devolution in Scotland, Scottish Government DEL funding is shown excluding tax and welfare block grant adjustments. Welsh Government DEL funding is shown including tax block grant adjustments.

[HCWS694]

EDUCATION

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: De-designation as Designated Quality Body

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): Today, I am announcing the de-designation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as designated quality body (DQB) for higher education in England under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA).

Assessing quality and standards is an integral part of considering applications to join the Office for Students (OFS) register, which enables providers to access student finance, sponsor visas for international students, and to become eligible to be granted degree-awarding powers among other benefits.

HERA makes provision for a body to be designated to carry out assessment functions under the Act. The DQB assesses quality and standards in relation to relevant conditions for providers registered or registering with the OFS. It also provides advice to the OFS regarding quality and standards in connection with the grant, variation and revocation of providers' degree awarding powers.

QAA has been designated since April 2018. On 20 July 2022, QAA announced that it would no longer consent to be the DQB after the current DQB year ends on 31 March 2023. The OFS supports QAA's request for its designation to be removed given that it has significant concerns about QAA's performance, which it has set out in its triennial report on the DQB's performance.

The Secretary of State is required to consult before removing the designation, even where the DQB has asked to be de-designated. Accordingly, my Department consulted from 8 February to 3 March 2023. The Government response to this consultation will be published today. An overall majority of responses—31 of 47—disagreed with de-designation. I have considered these responses carefully and appreciate that a number of higher education providers would prefer QAA to remain as DQB. However, QAA has made it clear that it would no longer be content to be the DQB. I also note that the majority of responses from representative bodies on behalf of their members agreed with de-designation, including Universities UK which represents 140 providers.

Having considered the responses to the consultation, and QAA's decision to step down from the DQB role, I have concluded that QAA should be de-designated as DQB. I will therefore publish a notice to remove the designation with effect from 1 April 2023.

Where no body is designated to perform the assessment functions, the functions revert to the OFS. The OFS has confirmed that, from 1 April 2023, it will undertake all quality and standards assessment activity on an interim basis pending further consideration of future arrangements. The DFE, OFS and HE stakeholders will work closely to consider options for long-term arrangements for the assessment of quality and standards.

I will deposit a copy of the Government response to this consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS695]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Powering Up Britain

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): Cheap, abundant and reliable energy is a foundation stone of a thriving economy. We rely on it to power our homes, our infrastructure, and industry. Affordable and plentiful energy makes businesses more competitive, generating growth, jobs and prosperity. It keeps the cost of living down, and will help bring down inflation.

A global pandemic, Putin's brutal war in Ukraine, and Britain's continued reliance on imported oil and gas have pushed up energy prices to unprecedented levels over the past year. The Government have stepped in to pay half of the typical household's bills over winter and around half of wholesale energy costs for some businesses. This was the right thing to do, but this approach is not sustainable.

The creation of a new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in February was a clear statement of intent by this Prime Minister and this Government. Energy security and net zero are two sides of the same coin. Cheaper, cleaner, domestic sources of energy can break our link with reliance on imported fossil fuels, meet our long term energy needs, bring our bills down and keep them down.

We are in a strong position to drive the energy transition. We have seen huge investment in our renewables sector since 2010. We currently have the world's largest operational offshore wind farm project, Hornsea 2, and the second, third and fourth largest operational offshore wind farm projects in the world. We have delivered the second highest amount of recorded low-carbon investment cumulatively across Europe over the last 5 years and estimate that since 2010, the UK has seen £198 billion of investment into low-carbon energy, through a mixture of Government funding, private investment and levies on consumer bills. Now is the time to go further.

"Powering Up Britain" announces the Government plans to diversify, decarbonise and domesticate energy production. The plans launched today will set out a blueprint for the future of energy in this country—boosting the UK's energy security and energy independence—and help to achieve wholesale UK electricity prices that rank amongst the cheapest in Europe by 2035. It will underpin the UK's clean energy transition, create new jobs and investment, protect consumers and businesses from volatile international energy markets, and drive us towards net zero by 2050. To meet this ambition, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero will deliver:

Energy security: setting the UK on a path to greater energy independence.

Consumer security: bringing bills down, and keeping them affordable, and making wholesale electricity prices among the cheapest in Europe.

Climate security: supporting industry to move away from expensive and dirty fossil fuels.

Economic security: playing our part in reducing inflation and boosting growth, delivering high skilled jobs for the future.

Our plan contains significant new policy and Government investment across different sectors of the economy, including:

Delivering Great British Nuclear (GBN): We are matching the global competition and scaling-up our nuclear programme by having launched GBN, responsible for driving delivery of new nuclear projects, backed with the funding it needs. The organisation will be initially led by an interim chair and CEO and will be based in or around the Greater Manchester area. This body will support our ambition to ramp up nuclear capacity in the UK to up to 24GW by 2050. The first priority of GBN is to launch a competitive process to select the best small modular reactor technologies. This will commence in April with market engagement as the first phase. The second phase—the down-selection process—will be launched in the summer, with an ambition to assess and decide on the leading technologies by autumn. The Government are committed to a programme of new nuclear projects beyond Sizewell C, giving industry and investors the confidence they need to deliver projects at speed.

Making a world-leading commitment to Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage: We are announcing the eight projects to progress to negotiations to form the first two CCUS clusters, in Wales, the North West and the East Coast of England, and that we will launch a process to enable expansion of those Track-1 clusters later this year. We are also launching the process for confirming the next clusters for deployment in Track-2. Our initial view is that Acorn and Viking are the leading contenders for Track-2 transport and storage systems.

Delivering a Hydrogen economy: Our 2030 hydrogen production ambition could generate enough clean electricity to power all of London for a year. We are announcing a suite of developments that get that ambition under way: confirming the first winning projects from the £240 million net zero hydrogen fund, naming the two CCUS-enabled hydrogen projects moving forward on the Track-1 clusters, publishing a shortlist of 20 projects we intend to enter due diligence with for the first electrolytic hydrogen allocation round (HAR1); and announcing our intention to open two further hydrogen funding rounds in 2023.

Accelerating deployment of renewables: Our goal is to develop up to 50GW of offshore wind by 2030 and to quintuple our solar power by 2035. We are opening the latest allocation round of the UK's world leading contracts for difference (CfD) scheme to incentivise investment in renewable energy. UK levy funded support for renewable power since 2010 has totalled around £80 billion. The UK is a world leader in offshore wind and floating turbines represent the next frontier. We are launching £160 million of funding for pilots of the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme to build UK port infrastructure to further reduce the cost of offshore wind.

Reducing household bills by increasing energy efficiency: We are confirming plans for our new energy company obligation scheme the Great British insulation scheme, extending help to a wider group of households. This will mean that around 300,000 of the country's least energy efficient homes could save £300 to £400 each year as part of a £1 billion energy efficiency programme by March 2026. This will form part of our work to meet our 15% demand reduction target by 2030 which will not only help lower bills, but also support our net zero objectives.

Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels to heat our buildings: The Government has an ambition to phase out all new and replacement natural gas boilers by 2035 at the latest. People's homes will increasingly be heated by British electricity, not imported gas. The heat pump investment accelerator will mean heat pumps are manufactured in the UK at a scale never seen before. We want to make it as cheap to buy and run a heat pump as a gas boiler by extending the boiler upgrade scheme by three years.

Decarbonising transport: We are signalling our long-term plans for decarbonising road and air travel, continuing to provide strong market signals and incentives to drive supply chain development. We are publishing a final consultation on the zero emission vehicle mandate: requiring that from 2024 an increasing percentage of manufacturers' new car and van sales are zero emission. We are announcing more than £350 million investment in electric vehicle charging infrastructure. We are also consulting on a long-term trajectory for sustainable aviation fuel uptake in the UK through a mandate to be introduced from 2025.

Speeding up planning and networks: We will be publishing a revised set of energy national policy statements for consultation, covering overarching energy, renewables, electricity networks, gas generation, and pipelines. On 23 February 2023 the Government published our nationally significant infrastructure project action plan, which sets out how the Government will reform the consenting process to ensure the planning system can deliver for the future, to meet the demands of a greater number and complexity of cases and deliver against Government ambitions. The Electricity Networks Commissioner, Nick Winser, has been tasked to advise Government on what

more can be done to accelerate grid delivery, and will present recommendations to Ministers in June. We will respond with an action plan this year.

Mobilising private investment: Our updated 2023 green finance strategy will strengthen the UK's position at the forefront of the growing global green finance market while supporting the investment needed to meet our targets. This includes maximising the impact of the UK's public financing institutions, for example through the UK Infrastructure Bank with its £22 billion of financial capital. It also sets out our pathway for the UK to become the world's first net zero aligned financial centre, equipping the market with the information and tools necessary to meet this goal.

Supporting industry through the transition: The Government are exploring a package of potential carbon leakage measures to mitigate this risk at all stages of the UK's net zero transition. Doing so will give industry confidence to invest in the UK in the knowledge their decarbonisation efforts will not be undermined. We are also announcing a new phase of the industrial energy transformation fund to support the development and deployment of technologies that enable businesses with high energy use transition.

Building on our COP26 Presidency: The UK will continue to lead internationally, building on our COP26 presidency. Two of the documents we are publishing today—the 2030 strategic framework for international climate and nature action and the HMG international climate finance strategy—show what this leadership will look like in practice. We are delivering on our commitments—including our £11.6 billion contribution from 2021-22 to 2025-26 to the $100 billion per year global climate finance goal for developing countries. Our international work delivers on the UK's domestic agenda—improving energy security by accelerating the energy transition, bringing down costs of new technologies for our own net zero plans, and opening up huge economic opportunities for trade and investment.

Detail of these announcements is included across a suite of publications, notably:

Powering Up Britain—The Energy Security Plan: which sets out the steps the Government are taking to achieve our vision to power the UK through affordable, home-grown, clean energy.

Powering Up Britain—The Net Zero Growth Plan: which builds upon the plan laid out in the net zero strategy, strengthening delivery by focusing on the action we can take to ensure the UK remains a leader in the net zero transition, and meets our carbon budgets. We are also responding to the independent review of net zero, led by my right hon. Friend Chris Skidmore, and partly or fully acting on 23 of his 25 recommendations for 2025, demonstrating that the Government are committed to delivering our decarbonisation targets in a pro-growth way.

The importance of this Department is clear. The aims of this Department are clear. We will deliver for amongst the cheapest wholesale electricity prices in Europe, powered primarily by renewables, domestically sourced, ensuring the security of our energy supply. We will maintain our position as a global leader on the net zero transition, ensuring we bring the world with us to meet this global challenge. Making Britain an energy secure, net zero nation, is one of the greatest opportunities of our time. This Department, and the plans we have outlined today, lay the roadmap to get us there.

I will place copies of "Powering Up Britain—The Energy Security Plan", "Powering Up Britain—the Net Zero Growth Plan", the 2023 green finance strategy, 2030 strategic framework and international climate finance strategy in the Libraries of both Houses.

I will continue to update Parliament on progress towards these aims.

Full list of publications

Powering Up Britain–The Energy Security Plan.

Powering Up Britain–The Net Zero Growth Plan.

NZGP annex–Technical Annex.

NZGP annex–Carbon Budget Delivery Plan.

NZGP annex–Government response to the CCC Progress Report.

NZGP annex–Government response to Net Zero Review.

2030 Green Finance Strategy.

2030 Strategic Framework for International Climate and Nature Action.

UK International Climate Finance Strategy.

Consultation on addressing carbon leakage risk to support decarbonisation.

Net Zero Research & Innovation Delivery Plan.

National Policy Statement.

Floating Offshore Wind Manufacturing Investment Scheme announcement.

Launch of floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme.

Consultation on the Clean Heat Market Mechanism.

Heat Pump Investment Accelerator Competition.

Launch of the draft scheme guidance and expressions of interest in the competition.

Patrick Vallance's Pro Innovation Regulation of Technologies Review: Green Industries report and HMG response.

Government Response on Secure, Smart Energy Systems.

Strategy and Policy Statement for Energy.

Consultation on the draft SPS.

Power Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage (BECCS) Government response to consultation on the power BECCS business model Cluster Sequencing Process Phase-2: Track-1 Project Negotiation List.

Cluster sequencing for Carbon Capture Usage and Storage (CCUS): Track-2 guidance.

Notice on gov.uk announcing the shortlist for the first electrolytic hydrogen allocation round (HAR1).

Notice on gov.uk announcing the Net Zero Hydrogen Fund (NZHF) strands 1&2 competition winners.

Consultation on Community Benefits for Electricity Transmission Network Infrastructure.

[HCWS690]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

FCDO Programme Allocations

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): The FCDO annual report and accounts 2021 to 2022 explained that the department's official development assistance (ODA) spending plans needed to be revisited to ensure all ODA-eligible spending was managed within 0.5% of gross national income (GNI). This was in the context of the significant and unexpected costs incurred to support the people of Ukraine and Afghanistan escape oppression and conflict and find refuge in the UK, and others seeking asylum. The Government provided additional resources of £1 billion in 2022-23 and £1.5 billion in 2023-24 to help meet these unanticipated costs, and we remain committed to returning ODA spending to 0.7% of GNI when the fiscal situation allows, in line with the approach confirmed by MPs in July 2021 which provides a clear measure assessed against independent forecasts.

I would now like to update the House on our spending in 2022-23 and plans for 2023-24 allocations. The tables below set out the top-level allocations for those years. These numbers are indicative and subject to revision. In deciding these allocations, we have applied the principles described in the Foreign Secretary's 22 November 2022 statement, "Official Development Assistance". These are: to focus spend on the international development strategy priorities; to meet our financial commitments to multilateral partners; and to empower FCDO officials to decide how to adjust bilateral programmes in line with our approach to prioritisation.

The Government remain committed to delivering the priorities set out in the international development strategy, and the strategy's spending targets where funding allows. UK development spending has funded work to build the sustainable foundations for prosperity and security around the world. Achievements include supporting women and girls' education and rights, as set out in the new international women and girls strategy, supporting jobs and infrastructure through British investment partnerships, and the launch of new just energy transition partnerships. Our development spending has also provided life-saving food, water, healthcare and sanitation around the world, as well as a rapid package of support for both Turkey and Syria in response to the devastating earthquake.

In 2024-25 we plan to spend £1 billion on urgent humanitarian needs and expect to mobilise up to £8 billion of UK-backed financing a year under British investment partnerships by 2025. We remain committed to the cross-Government international climate finance target of spending at least £11.6bn by 2026. We continue to work towards the IDS target on restoring funding for vital work on women and girls, and the new target set out in the international climate finance 2023 to 2030 for at least 80% of the FCDO's bilateral aid programmes to have a focus on gender equality by 2030.

I want to acknowledge to the House that the revisions to FCDO's ODA budget in 2022-23 and 2023-24 have necessitated difficult choices as our spending plans have changed. Throughout the revision process we have worked closely with our partners to understand the best way to allocate our revised budgets to deliver the most positive development outcomes possible for those who need our help. I am confident that our allocations will achieve this aim.

The integrated review 2023 reaffirms our commitment to the IDS and sets out our ambition to reinvigorate our global leadership on international development, by stepping up our contribution to the UN sustainable development goals, delivering our patient approach and strengthening how development is delivered across Government. The ODA Board, which I jointly chair with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, will more effectively scrutinise ODA spending, ensuring it delivers for UK objectives overseas and represents good value for money.

The FCDO annual report and accounts 2022 to 2023, due to be published later this year, will include full breakdowns of the 2023-24 allocations, including by country. The UK's statistics on international development will be published next week and will give a provisional overview of all UK ODA spend in 2022.

FCDO 22-23 ODA Allocation	
Multilateral organisations	£3,311m
Bilateral programmes	£2,511m
FCDO operating costs	£606m
Financial transactions	£411m
Arm's length bodies, scholarships and international subscriptions	£367m
Research and development	£300m
Vaccines	£66m
Total FCDO ODA 22-23	£7,572m

Bilateral ODA 22-23 Allocations	
DG Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean	
Africa (East and Central)	£418.4m
Africa (West and Southern)	£344.6m
Latin America, Caribbean and Small Island Developing States	£35.2m
North Africa	£2.9m
DG Humanitarian and Development	
Development and Parliament	£16.3m
Education, Gender and Equality	£93.2m
Global Health and COVID-19	£58.4m
Humanitarian and Migration	£55.3m
International Finance	£130.1m
Office for Conflict Stabilisation and Mediation	£18.3m
DG Economics, Science & Technology	
Economic Security	£5.4m
Economics and Evaluation	£0.8m
Research and Evidence	£15.8m
Technology and Analysis	£3.2m
DG Europe	
Europe Group	£6.8m
DG Geopolitics & Security	
Open Societies and Human Rights	£57.9m
DG Indo-Pacific	
British Investment Partnerships	£53.3m
Indian Ocean	£105.3m
Southeast Asia and Pacific	£77.7m
DG Americas, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Middle East & Overseas Territories	
Energy, Climate and Environment	£154.2m
Overseas Territories	£80.6m
Afghanistan and Pakistan	£304.4m
Middle East	£247.0m
DG Defence & Intelligence	
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	£226.1m
FCDO 23-24 ODA Allocations	
Multilateral organisations	£3,974m
Bilateral programmes	£2,191m
FCDO operating costs	£691m
Financial transactions	£554m
Arm's length bodies, scholarships and international subscriptions	£385m
Research and development	£300m
Total FCDO ODA 23-24	£8,095m
Bilateral ODA 23-24 Allocations	
DG Africa, Latin America & the Caribbean	
Africa (East and Central)	£389.8m
Africa (West and Southern)	£256.1m
Latin America, Caribbean and Small Island Developing States	£25.8m

Bilateral ODA 22-23 Allocations	
North Africa	£2.2m
DG Humanitarian and Development	
Development & Parliament	£9.6m
Education, Gender and Equality	£79.9m
Global Health and Covid-19	£41.8m
Humanitarian and Migration	£43.7m
International Finance	£130.9m
Office for Conflict Stabilisation and Mediation	£13.3m
DG Economics, Science & Technology	
Economic Security	£2.6m
Economics and Evaluation	£0.8m
Research and Evidence	£6.8m
Technology and Analysis	£3.9m
DG Europe	
Europe Group	£5.9m
DG Geopolitics and Security	
Open Societies and Human Rights	£64.2m
DG Indio-Pacific	
British Investment Partnerships	£108.9m
Indian Ocean	£105.4m
Southeast Asia and Pacific	£56.5m
DG Americas, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Middle East & Overseas Territories	
Energy, Climate and Environment	£155.8m
Overseas Territories	£85.7m
Afghanistan and Pakistan	£141.9m
Middle East	£229.6m
DG Defence & Intelligence	
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	£230.0m

[HCWS705]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS England: Revised Financial Directions

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, Lord Markham, has made the following written statement:

I am revising the 2022-23 variation to the financial directions to NHS England made on 30 June 2022 and setting the 2023-24 financial directions to NHS England. The amendment to the total revenue resource use limit for 2022-23 has been agreed with NHS England as required under section 223D(4) of the National Health Service Act 2006.

The directions include a number of transfers of funding between NHS England and DHSC that are in addition to the headline spending review/autumn statement settlement for the NHS. For example, funding is being transferred for the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing and access (VPAS), the covid-19 vaccination programme, as well as to fulfil manifesto commitments on primary care, car parking and nursing recruitment.

Furthermore, the directions also reflect the organisational changes which have occurred over the last year. The 2022-23 revised directions have now incorporated NHS Digital's revenue and capital budgets into NHS England's budget. Moreover, the 2023-24 opening directions will incorporate the full-year budgets of NHS Improvement, NHS Digital and Health Education England's budgets. This is because those organisations have been (or in the case of Health Education England, will be from 1 April) formally brought together with NHS England into a single legal organisation.

They will be published on gov.uk. The existing NHS mandate remains unchanged by these publications.

[HCWS706]

Approach to Managing Covid-19

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): On 21 February 2022, the Government published, "Covid-19 Response: Living with Covid-19" which set out the plan for living with covid-19. This response has enabled the country to manage covid-19 like other respiratory illnesses, largely due to the continued effectiveness of vaccines and improved treatments. Our approach to managing covid-19 from April 2023 continues this important work.

The overwhelming majority of people in the UK now have some protection against covid-19 through vaccination and/or previous infection, but the virus will continue to evolve and variants which are immune-evading may still occur. The Government will therefore maintain a range of capabilities to protect those at higher risk of severe illness. It will also retain proportionate situational awareness through surveillance, and maintain proportionate critical resilience for the future, for example a holding of lateral flow tests, should a dangerous new wave or variant emerge.

Proportionate scale back of testing

Appropriate levels of testing will remain to support diagnosis for clinical care and treatment and to protect very high-risk individuals and settings. Lateral flow device (LFD) testing continues to be effective in detecting positive results, including of new variants, providing better value for money than polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing at this stage of the pandemic as well as rapid results. LFDs will be used except where there is a specific clinical or epidemiological need to use a PCR test.

From April 2023 the Government will continue to fund and provide diagnostic PCR testing as part of the standard clinical management of individuals requiring covid-19 treatment (similar to other respiratory viruses) and LFD testing in the following situations:

Adult social care settings and hospices: symptomatic testing of care home residents to support access to therapeutics and for specific clinical need, symptomatic testing for staff working in hospices (which care for individuals unlikely to respond to vaccination), and outbreak testing for care homes and similar settings.

NHS settings: symptomatic testing for staff on wards caring for patients at the highest risk from covid-19 (who are least likely to mount an immune response to vaccination due to their current condition or treatment), symptomatic testing of some patients in hospital where needed to inform decisions such as ward transfers, outbreak testing and testing of all patients on discharge not care settings as appropriate.

People who are eligible for covid-19 treatments in the community: to enable access to antiviral treatments.

Individuals who live in high-risk closed settings: highly targeted outbreak testing and testing to support clinical care in settings such as prisons (and other places of detention), and homelessness, domestic abuse refuge and asylum seeker accommodation.

In line with this stage of the pandemic, routine asymptomatic and symptomatic staff testing in all settings will end. Individuals will follow the standard guidance for the population based on illness severity and symptoms. The guidance is available here:

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/people-with-symptoms-of-a-respiratory-infection-including-covid-19

Surveillance

The Government will maintain essential covid-19 surveillance activities in the community, primary and secondary care, and in high-risk settings, which will

enable the evaluation of the effectiveness of vaccination against a range of clinical outcomes, to inform vaccine deployment, and appropriate disease management. This will be underpinned by the continuation of genomic sequencing to detect and assess severity and vaccine effectiveness against new variants in surveillance studies and where PCR testing has been performed in secondary care on a proportionate basis.

Contingency

The Government will retain proportionate capability for testing use in the event of a covid-19 wave or variant that results in a significant increase in pressure on the NHS. Laboratory infrastructure and a stock of LFDs will be maintained to provide resilience to respond, allowing for a period of additional testing for individuals at higher risk of severe respiratory illness across the NHS and the care sector. A more comprehensive response can be scaled up, should this be needed.

Guidance

Guidance published on 1 April 2022 for individuals in the community with symptoms of covid-19 or respiratory illness continues to set out the actions we can all take to help reduce the risk of catching covid-19 and passing it on to others.

Guidance on covid-19 specific testing regimes for the NHS, adult social care and other high-risk settings will be updated to reflect the latest advice from public health experts. This guidance will be published for settings to implement from 1 April 2023.

Vaccines

The covid-19 vaccination programme continues to reduce severe disease across the population, while helping to protect the NHS. Covid-19 vaccines remain available to eligible groups, and the Government will continue to consider the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) on future vaccine selection and booster programmes for those at greatest risk.

Devolved Governments

UKHSA is committed to work with devolved Governments to take forward the testing programme in each nation from April 2023. While UKHSA will procure and distribute tests on behalf of devolved Governments, it will continue to be up to each nation to decide their own testing policy.

Conclusion

The Government will continue to work together with our partners to keep all these measures under review.

[HCWS702]

Maternity Investigation: Programme Transition

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): This statement updates Members on the transition of the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch's (HSIB's) maternity investigation programmes.

On 26 January 2022, *Official Report*, 25WS, by way of a written ministerial statement, the Department of Health and Social Care announced that a separate Special Health Authority would be established to continue the independent maternity investigation programme, which is currently overseen by the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch.

The Department is committed to ensuring the continuation of independent, standardised maternity investigations that provide learning to the system and contribute to the Government's ambition to halve the 2010 rates of stillbirths, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries in babies occurring during or soon after birth by 2025.

Following careful consideration, the Department has determined that the most appropriate and streamlined mechanism for delivering the valued and independent maternity investigations is for the function to be hosted within the Care Quality Commission. The purposes of the maternity investigation programme remain as set out last January: to provide independent, standardised and family-focused investigations of maternity cases for families: to provide learning to the health system via reports at local, regional and national level; analyse data to identify key trends and provide system wide learning; be a system expert in standards for maternity investigations; and collaborate with system partners to escalate safety concerns.

We will now work with the CQC and the HSIB to complete the transition of the maternity investigation programme to the CQC by October 2023.

As announced in the written ministerial statement of 9 February 2023, *Official Report*, 40WS, the establishment of the new HSSIB will take place in October 2023, to enable all the necessary work to be completed to ensure a smooth transition of these investigation programmes.

[HCWS698]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

East Midlands Freeport

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): Today I have the pleasure of announcing that east midlands freeport has received final Government approval, in a huge boost for the midlands. This is another significant milestone for the freeports programme and demonstrates the speed in which these areas, and the programme, are moving to deliver the freeport benefits. This gives a clear signal: the Government are backing these areas to grow and thrive.

Freeports play a major role in this Government's economic strategy by mobilising investment through a combination of tax reliefs on new economic activity, a special streamlined customs procedure, an ambitious programme of public investment, and wide-ranging support from the UK Government to help businesses trade. These measures will drive growth, create jobs and, in turn, bring opportunities and prosperity to the communities that surround them: a real example of levelling up in action.

East midlands freeport will now receive up to £25 million in seed funding, and potentially hundreds of millions in locally retained business rates to upgrade local infrastructure and stimulate regeneration. This is alongside generous tax reliefs and a simplified customs procedure, all backed by a package of trade and innovation support for businesses located there.

Armed with these tools, east midlands freeport will drive investments in and around the East Midlands airport and Gateway industrial cluster in north-west Leicestershire, the Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station site in Rushcliffe, Nottinghamshire and the East Midlands Intermodal Park in south Derbyshire. This will bring jobs, in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, automotive and space, to local communities.

And this is only the beginning. Across Government, we are working closely with the English freeports to support them to achieve their objectives and deliver transformational benefits for their local areas.

We also recently announced two new freeports in Wales as well as two green freeports in Scotland. Discussions continue with our stakeholders in Northern Ireland about how we can extend the benefits associated with the freeport programme there.

This is an incredibly exciting time for UK freeports and the wider levelling up agenda as we start to see local areas bring their plans to life with big private investments, upgrades to local infrastructure, and bold regeneration initiatives in those areas that need a boost, creating real impacts for local people.

[HCWS691]

Intergovernmental Relations Annual Transparency Report 2022

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): Today, the UK Government published the second annual report of our engagement with the devolved Administrations on gov.uk. This report has been laid as a Command Paper in both Houses.

The annual report follows on from each of the quarterly reports published on gov.uk throughout 2022. The report shows that the UK Government and the devolved Administrations share the same challenges and are working towards the same goals for the future. It gives an insight into the extensive engagement between the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive between 1 January to 31 December 2022. During this reporting period the Administrations worked together on a number of areas, not least in organising the commemoration of the sad passing of Her Majesty the Queen, the domestic response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including the Homes for Ukraine resettlement scheme, and the work to tackle the impacts of the global inflation crisis. The report demonstrates how our collective strength enables us to face and tackle big changes and challenges.

The report is part of the Government's ongoing commitment to transparency of intergovernmental relations to Parliament and the public. The Government will continue with publications to demonstrate transparency in intergovernmental relations.

[HCWS704]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of government changes.

The Government Debt Management Function will move from the Cabinet Office to HM Treasury, to sit alongside the centre for the Government Finance Function. This will improve the management of debt owed to the Government and provide strong expertise and leadership for the public servants in its profession.

Ministerial responsibility for the Fraud Act 2006 will move from the Ministry of Justice to the Home Office. This will enable a single Department to hold responsibility for policy and legislation relating to fraud against individuals and businesses, enabling the Home Office to best tackle fraud and reduce inefficiencies. The Home Office will continue to liaise with the Public Sector Fraud Authority, which sits across the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, in relation to tackling public sector fraud.

Both machinery of government changes will take effect immediately.

[HCWS692]

Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism: Intelligence and Security Committee Response

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): On 13 July 2022, the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament published their report entitled "Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism" (ERWT).

The threat from ERWT is an important issue for the Government and we are grateful to the Committee for devoting time and attention to this subject. Today, the Government are publishing their response to the report.

Copies of the Government response have been laid before both Houses.

[HCWS696]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 30 March 2023

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following is an extract from Prime Minister's Questions on 29 March 2023:

Angela Rayner: The right hon. Gentleman says that rape conviction has gone up. What he really means is that 300 women will be raped today while he boasts about an increase of 0.5%. He has not answered my question, because he is too ashamed of the answer: 1.6% of rapists face being charged for their crime—1.6%. Let that sink in. A woman goes through the worst experience of her life. She summons up the courage to relive that horrendous experience to tell the police in detail about her assault, but she only has a 1.6% chance of action being taken. Over 98% of rapists will never see the inside of a courtroom, let alone a prison. And the rest of those brave women? They keep looking over their shoulders and hope the perpetrator does not choose tonight to take their revenge for reporting the incident to the police.

In the last 13 years of the Tory Government, more than half a million cases of rape have been recorded by the police, but the charge rate for those attacks has collapsed. He has served under five Tory Prime Ministers and had three years as Justice Minister, and on his watch rapists are left to roam the streets. Will he apologise to those victims who will never get justice because of his failures?

The Deputy Prime Minister: First of all, the conviction rate measured by the Crown Prosecution Service—the leader of the Labour party used to be in charge of the CPS, so he might want to point this out—has gone up. It is now at 69%. We are doing much more to support victims of rape when they come forward.

[Official Report, 29 March 2023, Vol. 730, c. 1008.]

Letter of correction from the Deputy Prime Minister:

An error has been identified in my response to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner).

The correct response should have been:

The Deputy Prime Minister: First of all, the conviction rate measured by the Crown Prosecution Service—the leader of the Labour party used to be in charge of the CPS, so he might want to point this out—has gone up. It is now at **67.8%**. We are doing much more to support victims of rape when they come forward.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

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