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10 July 2023**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 10 July 2023

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE THIRD SESSION OF THE FIFTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 19 DECEMBER 2019]

FIRST YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 736

TWENTY THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 2022-2023

House of Commons

Monday 10 July 2023

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Antisemitism

1. **Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of levels of antisemitism in the last 12 months. [905854]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): We have paid close attention to the concerning figures produced by the Home Office and the Community Security Trust, which have shown the continued prevalence of antisemitism in our society. We are considering Lord Mann's recent reports on the subject, which we will respond to in due course, and we have increased the annual Jewish community protective security grant to £15 million in 2023-24.

Alex Sobel: Did the Secretary of State see the research from King's College London, showing that those who believe in conspiracies are most likely to be antisemitic? Much of that antisemitism takes place online and is legal but harmful. What is he doing to tackle conspiracism, misinformation and fake news; why are the measures to

tackle them in the Online Safety Bill so weak; and why have the Government removed the legal but harmful provision, which would protect so much of the Jewish community?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is right that there is a significant overlap between antisemitism and conspiracy theories, and many of the tropes that conspiracists use are drawn from the antisemitic library. However, with the Online Safety Bill it is important to balance the right to free speech with vigilance in dealing with hate, and this Government are absolutely committed to combating antisemitism wherever it rears its head.

Levelling Up

2. **Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): What steps he is taking to level up all parts of the UK. [905855]

22. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of increases in the cost of living on his Department's levelling-up agenda. [905876]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): Levelling up is not just a slogan—it is an imperative, and that is why it is a driving mission of this Government. I fear that if I outlined every step we are taking to level up, my extensive answer would take us beyond time, Mr Speaker, but to name a few highlights, we are establishing investment zones and freeports to create high-quality local jobs, delivering billions of pounds of investment into vital local projects and empowering local leaders through devolution deals, putting power and funding back into local hands. That is levelling up in action, and there is more to come.

Jon Trickett: All those words are just empty rhetoric. It is a con trick. The truth is that in a single decade the Government cut £540 billion from public services, and by March they will only have put about £500 million—one tenth of that—back in through levelling up. Is it not

clear that to level up properly, we need an end both to this Government and to the economic system they have established?

Dehenna Davison: Absolutely not. This is a Government that have put levelling up at the core of every single thing we do. That is not going to change. The only way to ensure levelling up remains at the heart of Government is by voting Conservative at the next election.

Carol Monaghan: Data from the Times Health Commission reports that nearly 11,000 people in England last year were hospitalised with malnutrition. Malnutrition itself has quadrupled since 2007, with a shocking rise in Victorian illnesses such as scurvy and rickets. Can the Minister explain how such shocking figures fit within her Government's levelling-up agenda?

Dehenna Davison: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that. She will know that the wider 12 levelling-up missions cover a range of areas, including health and healthy life outcomes. It is important that we all work together, across parties and across Government, to try to tackle this issue.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Minister understands that regeneration of our high streets is key to the levelling up of our communities, yet she is aware that in Gosport that is being paralysed by unfair council tax being slapped on houses in multiple occupancy—very high-quality ones that are key to the future regeneration of our high street. As part of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, the Secretary of State launched a consultation to address that question, but it concluded weeks ago and we still have not had the result. When will it be published?

Dehenna Davison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her engagement with me and the Secretary of State on that vital issue. Unfortunately, I cannot give her a specific date right now, but I will meet her as soon as we have the result in place, because I realise it is a vital issue that we need to address.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for recent visits to Mansfield and the east midlands to support the many levelling-up projects we have going on in our region, from freeports to development companies, integrated rail plans, investment zones and levelling-up and towns fund projects, including in Mansfield. All that amounts to billions of pounds. What impact does my hon. Friend think that will have on my constituency?

Dehenna Davison: My hon. Friend has done a great job of highlighting the incredible level of support going to Mansfield and the wider east midlands. A lot of that is down to great local leadership from him and his colleagues. That will have an enormous impact on the people living in the east midlands and on their opportunities to get on in life, which ultimately is what levelling up is all about.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Up and down the country, communities are struggling with the Tories' mortgage crisis and the cost of living crisis. Those hit hardest often live in communities that were promised levelling-up funding, yet the Government sit on £1 billion of promised levelling-up fund money—money that could make a difference to those who need it most. Where on earth is it? Will the Government commit today to starting a process for the allocation of it?

Dehenna Davison: I find myself a little confused, because we got a lot of criticism from the Opposition about round 2 of the levelling-up fund. They wanted us to get round 3 right, and we are taking the time to ensure that we get round 3 allocations right. We will, in due course, announce details on how we will allocate that money, which will change people's lives.

Business Liquidation: Costs to Local Authorities

3. **Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab):** If he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the capacity of local authorities to respond to unexpected costs arising from businesses entering liquidation.
[905856]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): The local government finance settlement of up to £59.7 billion for 2023-24 increases core spending power by 9.4%. Most of that funding is unringfenced, as local authorities are best placed to understand their local priorities. The Government also spend approximately £8 billion through targeted long-term investment in high streets and small businesses.

Cat Smith: Residents in the Marsh area of Lancaster, Lancaster City Council and I are concerned about the future of a skip site on the Lune industrial estate that has gone into liquidation. The cost of clean-up is higher than the value of the land. Will the Minister make time to meet me and Lancaster City Council to discuss what steps the council can take to ensure that residents know that the environment they are living in is healthy and safe?

Dehenna Davison: I understand that the hon. Lady is in touch with the Environment Agency about that, and that there is an ongoing investigation. Although she will appreciate that I cannot comment on any specifics of the case, I would, of course, be happy to meet her to discuss the wider issue of waste remediation. Our Government are committed to tackling waste crime: we have increased the Environment Agency's budget by £10 million per year and tightened the law to make it harder for rogue operators to find work in the sector and easier for regulators to take action against criminals.

Community Ownership Fund

4. **Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con):** What progress he has made on allocating funds through the community ownership fund.
[905857]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): The community ownership fund has been a significant success, and has so far awarded £36.8 million to 150 projects

across the UK. A total of £25.5 million has been allocated in England, £5.2 million in Scotland, £3.2 million in Wales and £3 million in Northern Ireland.

Simon Baynes: Does the Minister agree that the community ownership fund provides tremendous potential for community organisations in Clwyd South and elsewhere to take ownership of assets and amenities that risk being lost, and that the current bidding round is benefiting from the positive changes to the fund that were announced on 12 May?

Felicity Buchan: I agree that the community ownership fund has huge potential in Clwyd South and, indeed, across the UK. The changes that my hon. Friend alludes to—extending the maximum funding available from £250,000 to £1 million, reducing the match funding required, and allowing applications from parish, town and community councils—will mean that even more cherished assets and amenities can be saved for local communities. I remind the House that window 1 of round 3 will close on July 12.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The community ownership fund is an ideal fund to support Udney Park Community Fields Foundation, which has been working tirelessly with the community in Teddington and Twickenham to bring Udney Park playing fields and the war memorial pavilion back into community use for the benefit of local grassroots sports organisations. The site has gone to rack and ruin since two successive and badly advised developers bought the site eight years ago from Imperial College London. As the site goes back on the market, will the Minister agree to look favourably on any application from the foundation for that asset of community value?

Felicity Buchan: As the House will understand, I cannot comment on individual bids, but the hon. Lady makes a compelling case. The relevant Minister is happy to meet her.

Local Authority Funding

5. **Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of the impact of increases in inflation on local authority budgets. [905858]

13. **Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con):** What recent assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of local authority funding. [905867]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): We recognise that councils have faced challenges since covid, which is one of the reasons why we allocated billions more in subsidies to local authorities in the financial year 2023-24. Discussions on public spending often require hard choices and trade-offs on many worthy intentions, but we hope that the additional billions allocated demonstrate the Government's commitment to local authorities.

Christian Wakeford: Council budgets have been impacted by huge costs due to covid and the triple whammy of increases in demand for services, fuel prices and inflation. The Minister will know that people are scared and

running out of hope, so will he outline what support is available now to ensure that councils can still provide the vital services that people need?

Lee Rowley: As I outlined, we have allocated additional funds to local authorities in this financial year. It is also a statement of fact that a number of local authorities in England have increased reserves as a result of covid. In the last financial year, additional grant funding of nearly £7 million has gone to the hon. Gentleman's local council, Bury Council, for adult social care.

Gareth Bacon: Does my hon. Friend share my view that one way to support local government finance and to reward well-performing local authorities such as Bromley Council would be to introduce multi-year funding settlements? Will he commission a review into the merits of this, so that local authorities can better plan for the future?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a testament to the good work of Bromley Council that he can demonstrate this and talk about it with knowledge and experience. Multi-year financial settlements are something that we all aspire to. One of the reasons we brought forward the policy statement for financial year 2024-25 was to ensure greater clarity for councils at the end of this spending review, and we hope to be able to return to multi-year settlements in future Parliaments.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): Discretionary housing payments administered by councils are a vital resource in staving off homelessness. The figures—£140 million in 2021-22, £100 million in 2022-23 and remaining flat for the next two years—show a £40 million cut and further cuts owing to increasing demand and inflationary pressures. Section 21 evictions are not slowing down, the number of households facing rent arrears is soaring and the number being forced into temporary accommodation is skyrocketing. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has ultimate responsibility for homelessness, so when will Ministers at the Department tell their colleagues in the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions to wake up and smell the coffee?

Lee Rowley: One of the reasons why we have given local government additional funds in this financial year, as I just told the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), is precisely that we recognise that there are challenges. The Government have also allocated an additional £100 million for the most vulnerable households, to be administered through local authorities, which demonstrates the commitment to both local authorities and the most vulnerable in our society.

Local Authorities: Long-term Funding

6. **Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on long-term funding for local authorities. [905859]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): The Chancellor, his Ministers and his officials are in regular contact with the Secretary of State, me and departmental

officials on matters pertaining to local government finance. The final local government finance settlement for this financial year, 2023-24, makes available up to £60 billion for local government in England.

Helen Hayes: Local authorities have lost £15 billion of funding since 2010, as the Government have sought to outsource both the pain and the blame for their punishing approach to the public finances, with only a fraction allocated back on a piecemeal, time-limited and ad hoc basis. The reality for local authorities up and down the country is that it is increasingly becoming far too difficult to deliver all the services that local residents rely on. When will the Secretary of State stop treating local government like a pawn in his political games, and start treating local government finance with the seriousness that both residents and hard-working local government officials need?

Lee Rowley: Difficult decisions were taken in the years after 2010 precisely because Labour failed to make those decisions in the years before 2010. One of the reasons why we have made available additional funding for local government in this financial year is to demonstrate that we understand the challenges local authorities face. Ultimately, however, as I said to the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), this sort of issue requires hard choices and trade-offs—something the Labour party continues to fail to demonstrate it understands.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As inflation impacts on local authority budgets, planning departments are becoming especially squeezed. Councils are meant to approve big planning applications within 13 weeks, but over the last year only 19% have been approved in that timeframe, down from 57% ten years ago. What can the Minister do to improve funding for local council planning departments?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend highlights an important place where further progress is needed. We recognise that there are challenges in this area, and I know that the Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is the Housing Minister, and the Secretary of State are well aware of these challenges and seeking to address them. My portfolio includes nationally significant infrastructure programmes, and we have brought forward the NSIP action plan, demonstrating our commitment to speed up projects and decisions within them as much as we can.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Shropshire's Conservative-run council is trying to save £1 million a week just to balance its budget this year and restore its reserves to a safe level. Part of its problem is that the funding allocated to rural councils does not reflect the additional cost of delivering services in rural places. Will the Minister consider reassessing that allocation, so that rural councils can get the revenue they need to support the cost of the services they need to provide?

Lee Rowley: We are absolutely aware of the challenges that rural councils face. That is one of the reasons why we increased the rural grant within the most recent financial settlement by £10 million. Where there are

pressures in local government finance in the coming years, we will continue to work with colleagues across the House to address them.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent City Council is facing unprecedented pressure, particularly because there are now over 1,000 children in the care of the city council, as well as multiple education, health and care plans that require children to be taken out of the city to find the provision that they deserve. Will my hon. Friend meet urgently with the leader of Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Councillor Jane Ashworth; its chief executive officer, Jon Rouse; and Members of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent to quickly find a way forward and ensure that our finances are in the best possible position going forward?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who speaks with knowledge and experience on these issues. I would be happy to meet Members of Parliament from Stoke-on-Trent to talk about this matter in further detail.

Devolution in England

7. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase devolution in England. [905860]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): We have made significant progress in our mission to extend English devolution. In the past year, we have announced five mayoral devolution deals, which will bring devolution to over half of the English population. Most recently, I was delighted when the wonderful new leader of East Riding council, Anne Handley, signalled her ambitions for greater devolution.

Tom Randall: Last week, I attended an evidence session for the all-party parliamentary group on the east midlands' inquiry into investment in the region, which has been historically underfunded. Business leaders told me that the east midlands combined authority needs to be headed by someone with sharp elbows to get things done in the region. I know there is a man in Mansfield who meets that description, but can my right hon. Friend commit to giving that combined authority the powers to effect meaningful change, including considering west midlands-style powers?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a very good point: there is a man from Mansfield who would be an absolutely outstanding metro Mayor for the east midlands, and we need to give him all the power he needs. He has not only sharp elbows but a keen intellect, and he has the interests of the east midlands at heart. What Andy Street has done for the west midlands, Mr Ben Bradley can do for the east midlands.

Mr Speaker: You got there.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, the West Midlands Combined Authority that the selfsame Andy Street presides over is the second worst performing CA in the UK, judging by its growth figures. In that circumstance, should the public of Warwickshire not have a say in any

potential merger with that combined authority, as is proposed in the Secretary of State's levelling-up Bill that is going through the House of Lords?

Michael Gove: I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, but why does he think that Warwickshire cannot compete on the world stage as part of the West Midlands Combined Authority? Why does he have such little confidence in the people of Warwickshire? He has referred to the Mayor of the combined authority. Andy Street is the Mayor who has done most to deliver and, indeed, exceed housing targets as Mayor of the west midlands. Who has done the worst? Labour's Sadiq Khan.

Renters (Reform) Bill

8. **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for his polices of the Regulatory Policy Committee statement on the Renters (Reform) Bill impact assessment, published on 3 July 2023. [905861]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I have read it, and it seems fantastic.

Sir Christopher Chope: What a facile answer! Does my right hon. Friend not accept the criticisms of the RPC that the impact assessment is very weak in that it fails to address the impacts of the Bill on competition, innovation and investment, and on landlords who run small businesses and microbusinesses?

Michael Gove: I was very pleased that the impact assessment gave the Bill a green rating. I was particularly pleased that it indicated that the likely additional cost would be £17 a year, and that the benefits—both monetised and non-monetised—would be significantly greater than that. It is a progressive measure, which I hope my hon. Friend will be able to join me in supporting.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Renters' reform is important, as is safe housing. Residents of Norfolk House, a block of flats in my constituency, have suffered burst pipes, dangerous cladding, and sewage and hot water leaks that have ruined multiple flats. Residents have called it a "ticking time bomb" to see whose ceiling will collapse next. Both Galliard, the property developer, and Southern Housing, the housing association, are refusing to address those issues. Will the Minister commit to looking into that case, which has blighted the lives of residents for years?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that, and of course we will. Both the housing association she mentions and the developer she mentions have come to the attention of our Department before, so I am not surprised, but I am disappointed, and we will take action.

Affordable Housing

10. **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the provision of affordable housing in (a) Chesterfield and (b) England. [905863]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): The Government are committed to increasing the supply of affordable housing, which is why, through our £11.5 billion affordable homes programme, we will deliver tens of thousands of affordable homes for both sale and rent in communities up and down the country. When it comes to Chesterfield, I am aware that the local plan was adopted in July 2020, but ultimately local authorities are responsible for plan preparation and decision making, and they interpret national policy and guidance according to local circumstances.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful, but that is not really an answer to my question of whether the Minister considers that the amount of affordable housing is adequate. Under the Conservatives, the number of new social rented homes has fallen by over 80%, and there are now 27,000 fewer socially rented homes built each year than there were under a Labour Government. Meanwhile, hard-pressed mortgage holders are facing the highest interest rates in a generation. Is it not clear that neither renters nor buyers can afford another year of this Tory Government?

Rachel Maclean: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is aware that Chesterfield Borough Council is under the control of the Labour party, which, with the assistance of significant Government grant funding, is responsible for delivering affordable housing in the area. It is up to Chesterfield Labour party, in control of that council, to work with developers to make sure that planning obligations deliver the houses that local people need.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): We know that a lack of affordable housing can contribute towards an increase in homelessness. Of course, it is a big responsibility for different areas to tackle homelessness, and I am proud of what Ipswich does, particularly through organisations such as the Ipswich Housing Action Group. I am concerned to hear, though, that neighbouring authorities in the eastern region are sending their homeless people to Ipswich. Does the Minister agree that those authorities should shoulder the responsibility to tackle homelessness in their own areas and not send those homeless people to Ipswich? Will the Minister confirm that the Labour-led council can stop that happening if it wants to do so?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this vital issue to our attention on the Floor of the House. Of course, we expect local authorities to work together to tackle homelessness and to alleviate those pressures on the most vulnerable people. It is right for his Labour council to work with any other council that has responsibility for that.

Strength of the Union

11. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the strength of the Union. [905864]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): The Union, and support for the Union, is strong, and I was delighted to note that, in the most recent opinion polls, support for independence in Scotland is plummeting.

Patrick Grady: That is a very interesting definition of “plummeting”, when that support consistently remains higher than it was in the independence referendum of 2014. We were told during that campaign and afterwards that Scotland would have one of the most powerful we devolved sub-state legislatures in the entire world, if not the universe, so what is the Government’s baseline for that? Can the Secretary of State give us some examples of Parliaments that are more or less powerful than the Scottish Parliament?

Michael Gove: I would just note that, at the referendum to which the hon. Member refers, support for independence was at 45%, but it is currently at 37% in the polls, and 37 is eight less than 45. More broadly, the Scottish Parliament has significant powers. It is a pity that the Scottish Government do not use them and, unfortunately, as a result Scotland’s people are let down when it comes to education, where Scotland is tumbling down. Scotland, sadly, does not have the reforms that we have had in England, which have seen us rise up international league tables. It used to be the case that Scotland’s education system was the pride of the globe, but it is now England that has the best readers of the western world.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I want to ask the Secretary of State some questions on his role as the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and drug policy, of which he has said a number of interesting things. He is on record saying this:

“public health measures, which are backed by strong scientific evidence, which follow the lead of the doctors, the clinicians, we should look seriously at them.”

Drug consumption rooms and the decriminalisation of possession of small quantities of drugs have been proved to work throughout the world, and they have now been proposed by the Scottish Government. Does the Secretary of State accept that the outright rejection of that by the UK Government at the weekend—out of hand—undermines the Scottish Government, undermines those campaigners and those who help drug users, and undermines the Union?

Michael Gove: No, I do not accept that, but the hon. Gentleman raises a very serious question. I have had the opportunity to discuss with the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) some of the challenges that she faces in her constituency. The hon. Gentleman and I both know that drug deaths in Scotland are unacceptably high, and there is no single answer to that problem, but I believe, as was outlined clearly by politicians from both the Government and the principal Opposition party, that the Scottish Government’s proposals are the wrong proposals at the wrong time.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but the heads of all 31 UN agencies have called for possession decriminalisation, and more than 30 countries have made changes that have cut deaths and incarceration. There is no reasonable, rational and evidenced cause for the UK Government, or the Labour party, to reject the proposals out of hand. May I ask him seriously, in his role as Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, to be

the grown-up on his side of the Chamber, and work and engage with the Scottish Government and drug campaigners on the issue?

Michael Gove: As the hon. Gentleman points out, this is a complex, challenging and heartbreaking issue. It is right that the Governments should work together, and with the NHS, law enforcement and others, to deal with this challenge, but I believe that the specific proposals for decriminalisation of possession proposed are not the best way forward.

House Building

12. **Jane Stevenson** (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support house building. [905865]

14. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support house building. [905868]

15. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support house building. [905869]

16. **Kate Kniveton** (Burton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support house building. [905870]

20. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support house building. [905874]

24. **Paul Holmes** (Eastleigh) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support house building. [905878]

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): House building is a priority for this Government. We have announced £10 billion-worth of investment in the housing supply since the start of this Parliament, and ultimately, our interventions are due to unlock over 1 million new homes. We are also investing £11.5 billion in the latest affordable homes programme, to provide tens of thousands of new homes across the country.

Jane Stevenson: As my question concerns Wolverhampton, with your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to pay tribute to Councillor Ian Brookfield, the leader of City of Wolverhampton Council, who sadly passed away last week, aged only 57. Ian worked with many Ministers and the Secretary of State when the Ministry’s second headquarters moved to the city of Wolverhampton. He will be greatly missed by many people.

The Government have made a series of big investments in Wolverhampton, and that has positioned it as the centre of the home building industry. That includes millions of pounds for the National Brownfield Institute, the city learning quarter, and the Modern Methods of Construction taskforce. Will my hon. Friend the Minister support my campaign for an investment zone in Wolverhampton North East, stretching from Springfield brewery to the science park? That would help attract businesses to Wolverhampton, where they could capitalise on the expertise that our city now has in home building technology, and attract high-quality jobs to my constituency.

Rachel Maclean: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute, on my behalf and on behalf of all Ministers in the Department, to Councillor Ian Brookfield.

I thank my hon. Friend very much for her question. She is an absolutely superb advocate for her constituents and the city of Wolverhampton. I am pleased to tell her that the investment zone programme is under way; a shortlist of eight places in England selected for inclusion in the programme was announced in the spring Budget, and the west midlands is one of them. We are co-developing proposals, and we will look very carefully at her proposal, for the reasons that she set out.

Maggie Throup: I draw my hon. Friend the Minister's attention to the uncertain future of the housing development in Long Eaton in my constituency. It has been at a standstill since the termination of the house builder's contract 10 months ago. What further support is available to encourage the site owner to complete the more than 100 homes planned for the site, so that the development is not left to deteriorate beyond repair?

Rachel Maclean: I am of course concerned to hear about the situation that my hon. Friend highlights, and I would be pleased to discuss it with her in more detail, if that would be helpful. More generally, we are introducing a range of measures to increase transparency about build-out, to ensure that when development proposals are brought forward, the development actually gets built.

Jason McCartney: Labour-run Kirklees Council is taking in millions of pounds from housing developers through the section 106 levy, but local people are losing confidence in the system, as they just do not see the money being spent on local schools, local roads or local health services. Does the Minister agree that developer contributions, which are given to improve local infrastructure that is affected by major housing developments, should be spent on just that?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend highlights a most unsatisfactory state of affairs from Labour-run Kirklees Council. We are introducing a new infrastructure levy that will bring much-needed transparency. Local authorities, including Kirklees, should be spending that precious money on the infrastructure needed for local people.

Kate Kniveton: With the growth in development of new housing across my constituency, we must ensure that adequate provisions are in place to meet the essential needs of residents, such as at the Bramshall Meadows development, where residents are waiting for the play space they were promised, and at Branston Locks, where new healthcare services are needed to support that development. Can the Minister provide an update on what is being done to guarantee the successful and timely integration of these vital facilities in new housing developments?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend highlights well on behalf of her constituents the vital and pressing need for the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which includes measures to tackle exactly the issues she has highlighted. It will introduce a new infrastructure levy, which will reform the system of developer contributions, bringing certainty and transparency over the infrastructure needed to be delivered alongside development.

Peter Aldous: To address the housing crisis, we need to be building more homes for social rent, and planning departments must be properly resourced in personnel and funding. Will my hon. Friend set out the steps she is taking to address those two specific issues?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend speaks with considerable expertise on these matters. We know that many local planning authorities are facing capacity and capability challenges, which is why we have developed a programme of support, working with partners across the planning sector, to put more skills and capacity into planning authorities. Our levelling up White Paper is committed to increasing the supply of social rented homes across the country.

Paul Holmes: Lib Dem-run Eastleigh Borough Council, which is developing 2,500 homes on Horton Heath, last week passed a planning amendment to recklessly remove all affordable housing obligations, despite its being the developer of the site. Will my hon. Friend condemn that cynical move and assure me that no Homes England money will be used to backfill the gap?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the reckless behaviour of his Liberal Democrat-run council. I completely agree that it is a disgraceful state of affairs. The council should be using that funding secured to deliver the affordable housing that his residents rightly need and deserve. As he suggested, Homes England will definitely not be contributing to backfilling that need.

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

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I do not doubt the Minister's good intentions on house building, but does she accept that, according to her own Department's figures, housing starts fell by 12% year on year in the first three months of this year? That is down to a figure of just more than 37,000 starts, which is half the figure needed to hit 300,000 homes a year. On that basis, does she conclude like me that not merely is her policy not succeeding in hitting the housing targets, but it is considerably contributing to their failure?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Gentleman brings his considerable knowledge to this matter, but I will take no lectures from him and the Labour party on house building. This Government delivered 242,000 houses in 2019-20—that is the highest level for more than 30 years, including the entire time that the Labour party was in government.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): We do not just need to build affordable homes; we also need to build high-quality homes that are fit for the future and climate-resilient. In the past six years, the average cost of repairing a home from flood damage has been £60,000 a property, and Aviva calculates that one in four homes is now at risk of flooding. Will the Government ensure that their proposed national planning policy framework will finally prevent unprotected homes from being built in flood risk areas?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. The consultation on the NPPF has been well subscribed. We are analysing the responses now, but I am sure we will be able to say more in due course.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In Westmorland and Lonsdale, average house prices are 12 times average household incomes. The danger we have is that when we see houses developed, we are meeting demand, but not need. Should the Government not give us far greater planning controls, so that we can ensure that we do not see 100 homes built that are a waste of bricks going into the second home market? Instead, we should ensure that they are affordable homes, socially rented for local families.

Rachel Maclean: Local authorities have a huge amount of freedom. They have been given the tools by the Government through legislation, through developer contribution powers and through Homes England grants to deliver affordable homes. The hon. Member will also know about the wider work we are doing on second homes to enable local authorities to raise council tax. I hope he can see that the direction of travel will help alleviate some of the pressures he has highlighted.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Government are notoriously bad at disposing of public land—I need only look at NHS Property Services and the seven-year wait on the Bootham Park hospital site, and at Ministry of Defence land—so will the Minister look at how that can be co-ordinated and handed over to Homes England so that we can get building the housing that is desperately needed in places such as York?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that this is a priority for us. I take issue slightly with her comment that we have a poor record of disposing of public land. Often, that public land is needed by hospitals and the MOD. So we are working closely and looking at where such land can be brought forward for housing. If it can, we absolutely will be doing that.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Among the SNP failures that the Secretary of State chose not to mention is the fact that, since the SNP came to government in 2007, we have been building new council and social-rented houses at nine times the rate of any Government covering England. Does the Minister accept that if successive Labour and Tory Governments had followed the SNP's example in Scotland, the housing crisis in England would be far less than it currently is?

Rachel Maclean: No.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for her responses. One of the key issues is for urgent planning decisions to be made. The Minister has a keen interest in Northern Ireland, where the population has risen by about 100,000 up to 1.9 million. One thing that needs to be done is on infrastructure decisions, which need to be made here nationally, not regionally. What discussions has she had with the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that those decisions can be made to the benefit of all of us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: Only if the Assembly sits.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman so much. He is an active participant in all the debates we have on these issues. I continue to work closely with him and his colleagues in Northern Ireland, because we can work together and learn lessons from each other.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Do the Government realise how absurd all of this sounds? Their own flagship Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which is currently making its way through the House of Lords, has measures in it to block new homes from being built, and yet the Minister stands here berating councils for getting in the way. All of this is happening because Conservative Back Benchers have more control of housing policy than their Government. So when the local Conservative MP in Cambridge says that his latest scheme “will not happen”, he is probably right, is he not?

Rachel Maclean: I do not quite know how to give that a serious response. I have just set out in huge detail all the work backed by public funding—taxpayers' money—going into delivering the houses that people need up and down the country. As far as I can see, the only people blocking housing development are those such as the hon. Lady, who is objecting to developments in her own constituency.

Lisa Nandy: It is literally in the Government's own Bill—they are trying to block new houses from being built. They have had 17 housing Ministers and three planning overhauls, and house building is at its lowest level for a generation.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): Which clause?

Lisa Nandy: The Secretary of State wants to talk now—why did he not take the question? I suspect it is because he has again run into so much opposition from his Back Benchers about a story briefed only yesterday that he has had to abandon it. One hundred small and medium-sized house builders have been protesting to Downing Street and mortgages have gone through the roof. It really does take some brass neck to present that as anything other than an appalling record.

I have in my hand an analysis that shows that all this chaos will cost the economy £44 billion. Are the Government the only people left in Britain who cannot admit that the housing crisis, the mortgage crisis, the cost of living crisis and the economic crisis have one cause: Tory government?

Rachel Maclean: That was a flight of fantasy with several hundred questions. I am happy to engage with the hon. Lady on the detail of the clauses in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, but I am proud of the Government's record in bringing forward levelling-up across the whole country, with house building backed by billions of pounds of public funding and taxpayers' money. As I said in answer to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), our house building record is greater than that of her party for the entire time they were in government.

Rough Sleeping

17. **Ben Everitt** (Milton Keynes North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to end rough sleeping.
[905871]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): The Government are committed to ending rough sleeping. Last year we published our cross-Government strategy “Ending Rough Sleeping For Good”, which set out how we are investing a huge £2 billion over three years to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. In 2022 there was 25% less rough sleeping than the 2017 peak, and 28% less than in 2019, before the pandemic.

Ben Everitt: The best way to tackle rough sleeping and homelessness is to increase the supply of houses for people to live in. A joint report has been released today by the all-party parliamentary group for housing market and housing delivery, which I chair, and the all-party parliamentary group for ending homelessness, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi). The report found that we could bring 20,000 houses on to the market through conversions. Will the Minister meet me and a local charity that is very keen to do that, to discuss how we can take that forward?

Felicity Buchan: I would be delighted to come to Milton Keynes to meet my hon. Friend and his local charity. I want to reassure him that this Government are committed to increasing the supply of affordable housing and to ensuring that all houses are safe and of a decent standard. I look forward to reading in detail the APPGs’ recommendations.

Topical Questions

T1. [905879] **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I have been delighted to confirm that Lord Morse will be the new chair of the Office for Local Government. We are advertising the post of chief executive, which would suit someone with experience of local government who is looking for a new role, so I will pass on details to the shadow Secretary of State.

Mark Eastwood: Following the wonderful news that the Leslie Sports Foundation, based at Shelley Community football club, has been awarded £318,456 from the community ownership fund, will Minister visit the foundation to view its existing facilities and discuss its exciting plans for the newly funded one?

Michael Gove: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being a brilliant advocate for that project. I have no doubt that the work of the Leslie Sports Foundation will make a huge difference to the lives of people in his constituency. The Minister for Levelling Up, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), would be delighted to visit.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is now over four years since the Conservatives promised to ban section 21 no-fault evictions. It needs strengthening, but the Government finally published a Renters (Reform)

Bill in May this year. Given the desperate situation that many renters are currently facing, and the urgent need to provide them with greater security and better rights, why have the Government not lifted a finger to progress that legislation in the weeks since it was published?

Michael Gove: I share the hon. Gentleman’s desire to do more to help people in the private rented sector but, as he will have heard, we wanted to make sure that we had a fit-for-purpose impact assessment so that the House could reflect on the changes that we are making and the benefits they will bring.

T3. [905882] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What assessment has the Department made of the use of cash retentions in the construction industry and of possible measures that could prevent the practice, which causes cash-flow issues and costly administrative burdens for subcontractors, including those involved in house building?

The Minister of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Rachel Maclean): My hon. Friend will know that that policy area is led by the Department for Business and Trade. Nevertheless, it is important that we work closely with a wide range of stakeholders and businesses to achieve a consensus. It can sometimes be challenging, but we are clear that any solution must be a sustainable one that works for the industry and its clients, addressing the need for surety and fair payment.

T2. [905880] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): It has been more than 50 days since the Renters (Reform) Bill was introduced to Parliament. Despite ample parliamentary time, the Government have failed to set a date for Second Reading. In the last few weeks alone, the House has finished at 2 pm and 5 pm due to the Government bringing forward no business. Why do the Government not care about renters?

Michael Gove: The Bill, as you know, Mr Speaker, is beautifully formed, but the impact assessment that goes with it, as I pointed out earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), needs to be read in the round to see what a great piece of legislation it is. One thing that would enable us to bring forward legislation is if the Labour party were to end its pointless opposition to the Illegal Migration Bill. It is curious that the Labour party seems keener on being on the side of people smugglers than it is on the side of the private rented sector.

T5. [905884] **Richard Fuller** (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The recent transfer of the administration of home equity loans from Target to Lenvi has gone appallingly badly, with my constituents reporting unanswered emails and phones that ring out with no reply when they are looking to transfer their home in a time-critical phase. Will my right hon. Friend update me on what is going on with the administration?

Rachel Maclean: I have been having daily meetings with Homes England and the service provider. It is the case that there have been some issues with the transfer, as my hon. Friend highlights. I want anyone listening to this to know that they can contact either their local MP

or the service line, and we will resolve it. I have insisted that additional call centre staff are available and extended working hours. We are very much seeing the issues being worked through at pace now.

T4. [905883] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): According to figures from PricedOut, over the last 50 years housing has become over 13 times more expensive and tenants are now spending up to half their income on rent alone. If that trend continues, only one in three people born this year will own a home before they are 50. The Government's scrapping of housing targets and surrendering to Back Benchers opposed to new housing will only make the situation even worse. When will the Government grow a backbone, stand up to those MPs and build the houses we need to avoid catastrophe?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman but, as was pointed out earlier in these questions, the area of the country where housing numbers are worst, where planning permissions are being built out most slowly and where the fewest planning permissions are being granted overall has been London, under a Labour Mayor. I want to work with the Mayor to see him emulate what the Conservative Mayor in the west midlands, Andy Street, has done to deliver housing.

T7. [905886] **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know from my constant lobbying of him that it is my belief that the revenue support grant mechanism is inherently unfair and means that rural authorities such as Dorset, and particularly in West Dorset, receive little if any revenue support grant compared to the tens of millions that many urban areas, such as Wandsworth, receive. Will my right hon. Friend kindly tell me what he is doing to restore that balance and fairness for rural areas?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Lee Rowley): My hon. Friend has absolutely made this case on multiple occasions, both to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and to myself. He is a champion for West Dorset and for rural communities in general. We will continue to work with local MPs who are concerned about this, but I would just gently point out that the primacy and the desire of the local government sector in this financial year has been for clarity and consistency, which is what we have provided to them through the local government financial settlement this year.

T6. [905885] **Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): While the Government drag their heels on section 21, thousands of families are being evicted through no fault of their own by rapacious landlords—let's be honest about it—with 2,000 families in May alone this year. That is not acceptable. Meanwhile, the Secretary of State has been having cosy meetings with private landlords' associations, which gives the impression he is on the side of the landlords and not the renters. Will he at least say now that the Bill will come back in September?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch heard the careful case he prosecuted when he said I was on the side of the landlords. In fact, I am on the side of

a healthy private rented sector. The overwhelming majority of landlords do a brilliant job and I want to pay tribute to the National Residential Landlords Associations and Ben Beadle for their effective work in this area.

T8. [905887] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): The Department has a very large number of consultations either going out to consultation or being assessed right now. Now that my private Member's Bill, the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Bill, has received Royal Assent, when will my hon. Friend start the consultations required to enact it, so that we can kick out rogue landlords?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent private Member's Bill, which the Government were happy to support as it tackles a very real problem. The Bill has received Royal Assent and will become law on 29 August; we will start the consultation as soon as is practicable thereafter.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): Last week at business questions I raised the case of Tyrrell Court in Wakefield, where the social landlord, Wakefield and District Housing, has added a new service charge for communal lighting on top of the charge for window cleaning and communal cleaning, despite people having been tenants for 20 years without ever being charged that fee before. It adds up to £125 extra per year. Is the Secretary of State as concerned as I am that landlords are introducing these charges when people can afford them least?

Michael Gove: It does indeed sound a concerning case, and we will follow up.

T9. [905888] **Gareth Johnson** (Dartford) (Con): Property management companies are undoubtedly holding back home ownership. New homeowners are often obliged to sign up to contracts that they cannot leave. That leaves them stuck with inflated fees, and very often with poor services. I am sure the Minister agrees that management companies need their activities curbed; they need legislation imposed on them so that we can get back to a fairer system of housing.

Rachel Maclean: I agree entirely. I thank my hon. Friend for the excellent debate that he brought to Westminster Hall, in which we discussed these issues in detail. I am happy to reiterate to the House that we will legislate, when parliamentary time allows, to deal with many of the issues that he has raised that are affecting freehold homeowners.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that he had the noble aim of abolishing the feudal leasehold system. Could he update the House on his progress on the abolishment of that feudal system?

Michael Gove: It will be in the King's Speech, God willing.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): The A38 is the main route to the largest city on the Devon and Cornwall peninsula. This nationally significant

route needs substantial work between Carkeel and Trerulefoot in my constituency. What work is the Department doing with the Department for Transport to make that a reality?

Lee Rowley: My hon. Friend highlights the importance of nationally significant infrastructure programmes all across the country. It is vital that we speed up those projects and make sure that they deliver for local people more quickly. My hon. Friend is a champion for the A38; I know that she will be talking to the Department for Transport, and I am happy to do so as well.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that the Scottish Government are not using the powers that they have, but it is his Government who keep vetoing Scottish Government policies and legislation that has been passed by the Scottish Parliament. Does that not just show that the Conservatives never wanted devolution in the first place and can now barely contain their glee at getting to roll back the powers of devolution?

Michael Gove: No, it was the Scottish National party that did not want devolution; it wants independence. It is in the name, isn't it? They are nationalists and they want to break up the United Kingdom; we extend devolution within England and we support it in Scotland.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): Thanks to the Government's brownfield land release fund, Solihull Council is getting on with the job of regenerating Kingshurst village centre, including by building new environmentally friendly houses. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State accept my invitation to see at first hand the progress of the regeneration of Kingshurst village centre, and see how it can be supported further by a successful levelling-up fund round 3 application?

Michael Gove: Once again, my hon. Friend makes a brilliant case on behalf of the residents of Solihull borough.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Fife Council is currently working on the details of the levelling-up fund, which gave us some of our own money back under the last round. Most of that money—over £14 million—is for connectivity projects related to the very welcome reopening of the Levenmouth rail link. Since the bid was put together, it has become clear that by far the most important connectivity project associated with that reopening is the construction of a pedestrian footbridge to maintain the ancient public right of way at Doubledykes crossing in the middle of my constituency. If it becomes clear that the project has support from the community, will the Secretary of State allow Fife Council to reallocate the funding—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please—these are topicals. I have given you the advantage of having two goes. Don't take advantage of the rest of the Members, please.

Michael Gove: I will investigate the matter. It is important that public access is maintained. I do sympathise with the hon. Gentleman: given that there are now no Labour Back Benchers left to ask questions, he has to take the Opposition responsibilities on his shoulders.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): May I thank the Levelling Up Minister for her time when we met to discuss community projects in Bracknell? East Berkshire would also welcome its fair share of levelling-up love, so could she please advise on the how and when for the next tranche of funding?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for outlining the concerns of local residents, showing why levelling up is also needed in parts of the country like Bracknell. We will imminently announce full details of levelling-up round 3, and I will, of course, provide him with those details when we have them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): To strengthen the Union, and with the Windsor framework not able to answer all the difficulties due to the Northern Ireland protocol, what recent discussions have taken place with Cabinet colleagues on pressing the EU for a common-sense approach and on making the necessary adjustments to keep Northern Ireland a functional and integral part of the UK, which is the will of the people?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it is the clearly expressed will of Northern Ireland's people to be embedded in the United Kingdom, and we need to make sure that the EU takes a constructive approach, following on from the publication of the Windsor framework. My right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary are taking that forward.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): Eastbourne secured £20 million in round 1 of the Government's levelling-up fund, part of which is set to transform a disused dairy and downland farm into a world-class visitor centre. Will previously successful constituencies, such as mine, be eligible to apply for the forthcoming round 3? We have big plans for the seafront.

Dehenna Davison: My hon. Friend continues to be a fantastic champion for Eastbourne. We will be announcing full details of levelling-up round 3 in due course, but we are taking on concerns, from those who have previously received funding and from those who have not, to make sure that we get this third round absolutely right.

Mr Speaker: So Chorley will do well?

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Playgrounds are often a godsend for stressed parents. They are great for kids' development, and they are free entertainment during all these cost of living pressures. Will my right hon. Friend consider earmarking a fund so that parish councils and community groups can bid to improve areas that are in a poor state or that lack the inclusive equipment we all want to see?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for better provision of playgrounds and stronger support for families and young people. The community ownership fund is available for some of the purposes she mentions, but I look forward to working with her to do more in this area.

Rape and Sexual Violence: Criminal Justice Response

3.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on measures to improve the criminal justice response to rape and sexual violence.

This Government are unwaveringly committed to protecting the public and fighting crime. As I am sure Members across the House will agree, few parts of that mission are as important as the ongoing effort to tackle rape and sexual violence. As I heard on my recent visit to Greater Manchester police, these are sickening, destructive crimes that can only have a significant impact on human dignity. They are a betrayal of everything we stand for as a law-abiding society, and they can have profound and lifelong consequences. My thoughts and prayers are with every single victim.

Although we are united in our outrage at these horrific acts, sadly we cannot turn back the clock. What we can do, and what this Government are determined to do, is ensure that the criminal justice system does not add to the suffering and trauma experienced by victims and survivors. On that note, I will update the House on the work being done to drive improvements in the criminal justice response to rape and sexual violence.

Two years ago, in the rape review, the Government set out steps to transform support for victims and to ensure cases are fully investigated and rigorously pursued through the courts. Crucially, we heard that many victims who have reported to the police feel that they are the ones under investigation and do not feel believed. For example, we know that victims have faced digital strip searches, with intrusive requests for access to their mobile phones. Last year, we changed the law to end such distressing and intrusive practices, and to protect victims' right to privacy where it is necessary. We are introducing new legislation through the Victims and Prisoners Bill so that therapy notes and other personal records are accessed only when necessary and proportionate to an investigation. But we must go further. The investigation of rape must be no different from the investigation of any other crime, with the focus firmly on the suspect.

To support policing to transform its response to rape, the Home Office has already provided over £6 million to Operation Soteria, bringing together more than 50 world-leading academics from across the country, led by Professor Betsy Stanko and Professor Katrin HoL, and frontline officers from 19 police forces, to develop the new national operating model for rape and serious sexual offence investigations. This model, launched today, means that all police forces in England and Wales will now have the tools they can apply to conduct suspect-focused investigations which ensure victims' needs and rights are central; through the College of Policing, they can access learning to develop their skills and build a comprehensive understanding of the psychology of sexual offending.

Nineteen police forces have participated in the programme, and we have already seen signs of change. All pathfinder forces have seen an increase in the number of cases being referred to the Crown Prosecution Service and a reduction in the average number of days taken for

a charge outcome to be assigned. Charge volumes in Avon and Somerset have more than tripled, rising from seven charges to 22 charges in October to December 2022. The Met has seen an 18% reduction in victims withdrawing, with this falling from 743 cases before Soteria to 611 cases in October to December 2022. The charge rate in Durham has increased, rising from 2.6% to 12.6% since that force's involvement in Operation Soteria. The number of cases being referred to the CPS by West Midlands police has doubled, with it rising 108%, from 26 to 54 cases; and charge volumes in South Wales have increased by 110%, rising from 10 cases before Operation Soteria to 21 cases in October to December 2022.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary and I are encouraged that all police forces in England and Wales have committed to implementing this new approach. We have already met, or are on track to meet, the ambitious targets set out in the review ahead of schedule: to more than double the number of adult rape cases reaching court by the end of this Parliament; and to return the volumes of cases being referred to the police, charged by the CPS and going to court to at least 2016 levels.

We want to go further and faster, and we are doing exactly that by providing a further £8.5 million to continue to support the police to improve their response to rape. That will be used to establish a new joint unit with the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing to oversee and support forces as they implement the model, continuing to draw on academic expertise and oversight. We will continue to roll out a Government-funded uplift in technical capacity and capability to ensure that no adult victim of rape is without a phone for more than 24 hours.

The NPCC and College of Policing have also made significant commitments: 2,000 police investigators will complete specialist training on the investigation of rape and sexual offences by April next year. A new first responder course will be compulsory for all new police recruits from April next year, to ensure that victims of rape get the right support and treatment they need at the time of reporting. We will also consult policing partners on the most effective way those officers can be used, including the effectiveness of dedicated rape and sexual assault investigatory units.

Operation Soteria has shown the importance of scrutiny to drive progress, which is why the Home Secretary has also commissioned His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to carry out a thematic inspection on forces' implementation of the Soteria model. I want to be clear: there is further to go and there is no room for complacency. We want victims to have the confidence to report these crimes, knowing they will get the support they need, and that everything possible can and will be done to bring offenders to justice. This Government will work with policing to do everything in our power to ensure that happens, and I commend this statement to the House.

3.38 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I of course welcome today's statement—any progress on this issue is to be welcomed—but I would outline that the rape review was commissioned in 2019. It then took two years to publish, and we rightly got an apology from the

Government for the catastrophic decline in prosecutions. However, the report contained only piecemeal changes, which is why, another two years on, we are here today discussing progress, yes, but marginal progress.

In the data outlined by the Minister on the number of cases now being charged, she did not make it clear that hundreds of cases were still not charged in each police force area she spoke of. The Government seek to get back to 2016 standards, without recognising that it was on their watch that the system crashed. Charges and prosecutions dropped to their lowest levels on record, just at the time when rape offences recorded by the police skyrocketed to record levels. What the Government are celebrating today is simply the beginning of a reversal of their failure of survivors—like smashing a vase and celebrating when it is half stuck back together with sellotape. In this time, countless rape victims have been left unsupported, or have dropped their cases or never even come forward. This morning, I received a text message from a rape victim I have been supporting, who waited over five years for her case to be heard. She said:

“Is there anyway I can see you this week? I really need to speak to someone before all this gets any worse, I just cannot deal with my own head right now.”

She, like thousands of others, has been let down by the system, and the public have been left at risk, with attackers still walking free.

The numbers that the Government have not mentioned today are those for outstanding rape cases, which show a record high of 2,040, up from 1,379 a year previously. More rape victims are waiting longer than ever before. The Government’s own scorecard for 2022 has the attrition figure at a staggering 62%. Survivors are still being left unsupported and are dropping their cases. Will the Minister say whether the Government will back Labour’s proposal for all rape victims to have legal advocates, when my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) pushes that amendment tomorrow in the Victims and Prisoners Public Bill Committee? Rape Crisis has called for it, the Labour party would do it, and the victims need it. Will the Government vote against support for rape victims tomorrow?

The green shoots of police improvements from Operation Soteria are welcome, as is its roll-out as a national operating standard. However, to be successful, it must maintain that academic rigour and independent input throughout the national implementation. It cannot just be a good pilot that is spread out to police forces as a checkbox. Will the Minister confirm that the academic rigour that the scheme started with will continue in every one of the 43 forces, as it is rolled out? The total number of charges for adult rape in quarter 1 of 2016 was 2,270. In quarter 4 of 2022, it was 1,748, a 23% drop.

Labour announced over two years ago that we would implement specialist rape courts, listing rape cases as a priority and fast-tracking them. The Labour party has called again and again for specialist rape and sexual offence units in every police force, something that still does not exist. The Government say today that they are having a think about them. I ask that they think a little faster. If they had listened, they could have all been rolled out and could be supporting survivors now. Labour would also increase the number of prosecutors, to put rapists behind bars and reduce the record backlog across the courts. We welcome progress, but the Government could and should be doing much more.

Miss Dines: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments. I am afraid that I do not accept that the work has been piecemeal. This is a sea change in how the model is being operated. I have done some research, my civil servants have done some research, and I have spoken to the academics and the people who meet victims all the time. There is no other country in the world, that I can find, that has a similar operating model. Over 50 academics have worked tirelessly with some excellent officers. This is not piecemeal; this is a sea change, but there is a lot more to do.

I do not accept that the change is marginal. It is fundamental. This is a different way of looking at victims and the suspect. It must not be forgotten that all crime, not just particular, different sorts of crimes, needs to be hammered down and stopped by the Government. That is what we expect from the judiciary, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Yes, rape cases are of course far too high; they are coming down, and more must be done. I, too, am concerned about attrition. We must change that, so that we can support our women, and boys and men at times, who have been raped. There is academic rigour, and it will be rolled out. There will be proper monitoring, and there is a proper unit to make sure that the operating model is rolled out properly.

The question of specialist rape courts is brought up often by the hon. Lady. Of course, it is a very complex matter. With respect, all victims of crime deserve decent, proper courts. We should not be singling out one offence over another, because all these crimes are heinous and they all deserve a resolution to the complex situation.

We have already completed a national roll-out of pre-recorded evidence, which is one of the main things victims ask about when they want special rape trials. Through that roll-out of pre-recorded evidence, we are sparing victims the ordeal of appearing before a live courtroom, which helps them to give their best evidence. We are talking today about evidence.

To ease the court process further, we are updating the victims code, so that members of the Crown Prosecution Service team must meet rape victims ahead of their court cases to answer their questions and allay any fears they have. In the next phase of our specialist sexual violence support project, we will ensure that at participating Crown courts, including Snaresbrook, where I commonly worked, Leeds and Newcastle, the option to remotely observe a sentencing hearing by video link is available to any adult rape victim who needs it, subject to the judge’s agreement.

These are complex issues. The work is on evidence, not rhetoric. We are getting there, but there is a lot more to do.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I gently say to my hon. Friend the Minister that some kinds of offences can and should be singled out. Actually, that is exactly what we have done with the strategy on violence against women and girls, with the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021, because we have to recognise that sexual offences against women have a particular personal, traumatic impact, and we need to do more.

[Caroline Nokes]

However, I was pleased to hear her single out Avon and Somerset police, and I pay tribute to Chief Constable Sarah Crew, who is the most amazing woman and has spearheaded efforts in that police force to ensure victims are treated sensitively, appropriately and swiftly. The same cannot be said about every police force.

We are now some four months or so on from the Casey review into the Metropolitan police, and too many women still say to me that they do not want to report a crime against them to the Met because they have no confidence that it will be treated fairly and properly, and that they will not end up being the ones on trial. What more can my hon. Friend the Minister do to instil, as she put it, “confidence to report crimes”, when it comes to our capital’s police force?

Miss Dines: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend; I know she does great work in this area. I too have been thoroughly impressed at my many meetings with Sarah Crew. She really is a breath of fresh air and I put a lot of hope in the way that she has managed to roll out new ideas about how to police this area. Of course these are heinous crimes and very special offences.

In relation to the Metropolitan police, I have met the commissioner and the deputy commissioner, and I sense there is a change. The oil tanker is moving. At the moment, it is moving too slowly; it needs to move faster. I am optimistic about the new training that new officers are receiving. The emphasis on specialist trained officers is encouraging and I am sure we will see progress.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I associate myself with the words of the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). I agree with everything that she just said. More than a year ago, the Home Affairs Committee recommended that all police forces should establish specialist rape investigation teams. We know that they produce better decision making, can address delays and improve communication with victims and the CPS.

We also urged the Government to collect and publish data on the number of police officers in each force with specialist rape and serious sexual offence training. Can the Minister explain why specialist rape investigation teams are still not in place in every police force and what she will do about that? Can she confirm how many serving police officers, as of today, have received specialist training on rape and serious sexual assault? What proportion of the 20,000 new recruits will also receive that specialist training?

Miss Dines: I thank the right hon. Lady for her incisive questions. I suggest that the issue is about specialism, rather than specialist units. All police forces have different operational ways of working. She will recall the evidence of Sarah Crew, who said that there is no quick fix for each particular force. She said that every force must look closely at the way they are operating. However, specialism of training is key. The National Police Chiefs’ Council is very firmly looking at what will

be rolled out. The modules in relation to domestic abuse and to rape and serious sexual offences are being updated. The right hon. Lady is quite right to point to training, as that is important. She mentions data, which is also very important. We are improving and collecting more data—far more than has been collected previously, as far as I am advised. I am optimistic that we are working together. Her Committee plays a vital role in assisting the experts and informing the way that they work.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome the Government’s measures on rape and sexual violence, but I invite the Minister to consider this: Colin Pitchfork, who brutally raped and horrifically murdered two teenage women in my constituency is being provisionally released by the independent Parole Board. I know that she does not have responsibility for the Parole Board, but what my constituents and, I think, the wider British public do not understand is how somebody who has committed appalling sexual violence against two young women can possibly be released? Does she agree that that position can only be regarded as irrational?

Miss Dines: I agree with my hon. Friend. The case of Colin Pitchfork is dreadful, and I am very aware that the Ministry of Justice are working hard on that. Recently, my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor said that he expected more work to be done in this space. I commend my hon. Friend for the hard work that he does in his constituency and nationally in this area.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is clear that Operation Soteria is seeing improvements, but, frankly, the bar is very low. I associate myself with the comments of the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee that the crime that we are discussing is different. Faith in policing and the justice sector more generally is impacted when a force that was using Soteria—the Met—was found in the Casey report to have

“a strategic and operational failure to tackle rape and sexual offences...which compounds the harm of the victims.”

I note in the Minister’s statement comments in relation to the thematic inspection. It is not just about training, but about ensuring that those resources have the time and capability to be able to investigate those crimes. Will the thematic inspection be looking at that?

Miss Dines: As far as I have been instructed, the inspector will be looking at that. The Casey review made for very sobering reading. It is paramount that public trust in the Met is restored, and we have to work hard on that. The Home Secretary has made it very clear that standards must and will improve in the Met as a matter of urgency. She, like me, will continue to hold the commissioner and the Mayor of London to account for delivering that change. I thank the hon. Lady for her continuing interest in this important area of work.

Kate Kniveton (Burton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to rid victims of the feeling of shame associated with rape and to encourage more victims to speak out, the investigation of rape must focus on the suspect, rather than the undermining and digital strip searching of the victim?

Miss Dines: My hon. Friend makes one of the most important points so far this afternoon. The shame and blaming must change: we need to treat rape sensitively and focus a little more on the aggressor—the alleged rapist—to ensure that there is more fairness and justice in investigations. That has been lacking. The Government were clear about that when they apologised recently for the way that this issue has not been looked into sufficiently. We need to believe the victim and make sure that there is fairness in the way that the evidence is obtained.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): We all welcome progress, however small that may be. The Minister has said that the tanker is slowly turning, and there is a lot more to do. Does she not agree that one major issue is around people having the confidence to engage with the system, which would be better served by its embracing the principles of the independent legal advocate scheme?

Miss Dines: The Government do not agree at this stage that that is the right way forward. The crux of the matter lies with specialism of the investigation—with sensitive policing, listening to victims and letting them know, for example, that they can have their digital equipment and their telephones back in 24 hours, rather than having them taken by the police and on some occasions left for weeks or months without being returned. It is all about confidence, but it is also about specialism of the investigating officers and of the prosecutors.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I have a constituent who was brutally raped in the '80s. Despite presenting the evidence then and again more recently, she never got the support or the justice she deserved, due to failings within the Met. Can the Minister spell out what precise support historical victims of rape will receive following the review? Will it mean that, for my constituent and other victims of rape, justice will finally be secured?

Miss Dines: As far as I am aware, through the Ministry of Justice's new Victims and Prisoners Bill, all victims will receive further assistance. These are heinous crimes, and whether the crime happened a day, a year, a decade or 50 years ago, all victims deserve support. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the amount of work that she does in this area and I will be happy to write to her, or to get the relevant Minister in the Ministry of Justice to write to her, with more particulars.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, the Government introduced pre-recorded cross-examination to allow victims to pre-record their evidence and spare them the trauma of attending court in person. What progress has been made across the court system with those new procedures? Also, can the Minister reassure me and my constituents that, when sentenced, rapists are now serving longer in prison than they were before?

Miss Dines: Giving confidence to anybody who appears in court is important, particularly with this sort of heinous crime. As I mentioned earlier, we have completed a national roll-out of that pre-recorded evidence, which spares the victims of those ordeals and really makes a massive difference. It is one of the things that is brought up time and again when I speak to victims: they want to give their evidence in a fair way and not to feel that they are on trial. That is exactly why the Government are rolling out pre-recorded evidence. The victims code will go even further in allowing and in fact mandating prosecutors to meet people who are about to give evidence and who have been the victim of an alleged rape. It is a really good step forward and I commend the victims code to the House.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for responding to questions and for her statement. While I welcome the fact that the 43 police forces in England and Wales are to implement a new approach to investigating rape, can I ask the Minister what information sharing there is with the regional Administrations about these protocols, and what additional funding is available to help the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland justice system to see this apparently attainable improvement replicated in Northern Ireland?

Miss Dines: This holistic new approach is supposed to affect and influence the whole way we deal with fighting rape—investigating, gathering evidence and getting cases before the court. I want to see that specialism and those measures rolled out everywhere. I would be very happy to get the relevant Minister to write to the hon. Gentleman to explain what more we can do to assist the special situation and what we have in Northern Ireland. It does not matter where someone lives; if a woman or a man has been raped, they deserve to have that support. I am grateful for the question.

Points of Order

3.58 pm

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Let us take points of order one at a time. We will start with Andy McDonald and then go across to the Government side.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Friday *The Northern Echo's* front page and editorial lamented the apparent decision of Advanced Cables to build its new facility on the Tyne rather than the Tees, quoting Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen and the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Sir Simon Clarke), who both blamed me for the company so deciding, without a single shred of evidence for such a ridiculous notion.

Companies, of course, make their decisions on the basis of their own assessment and due diligence processes. However, such personal and unfounded attacks are not without consequences. Last week a senior corporate lawyer, Andrew Lindsay, posted on his LinkedIn account:

“If it turns out the enquiry concludes that ‘there is nothing to be seen here’ and in the meantime some investment and jobs are lost, local Labour MP, Andy McDonald...should be dragged through the streets of Teesside and lynched.”

That has deeply upset and alarmed my family and me.

I have reported the matter appropriately, but given the murders in recent years of Jo Cox, of Sir David Amess and of Andrew Pennington, Nigel Jones's personal aide, and not forgetting the stabbing of our right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), I seek your guidance on what can be done to ensure that legitimate debate on matters of such significance to our constituents does not spill over in a manner such that the appalling comments of the likes of Mr Lindsay are increasingly likely. What more can this House do to protect and support Members who are on the receiving end of such abuse, and to reduce the likelihood of such dreadful outbursts, be they on social media or elsewhere?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. As he says, people are entitled to make their views known inside and outside this House, but threats to Members are very real, and those who comment should consider the potential effects of their words before posting injudiciously, rather than afterwards. I take this very seriously. When he texted me on Friday, I also spoke to people about security issues. I will not go into that part of it, but he can rest assured that we will defend Members on both sides of the House. Nobody should be threatened as they carry out their duties. We will certainly not forget those who were murdered carrying out their duties.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. After a Westminster Hall debate on 4 July, in which the House reassured its commitment to never forget the genocide of Srebrenica and the need to

safeguard the Dayton agreement, I was deeply alarmed to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, was threatened by the President of Serbia, who said in response to her speech:

“we are already conducting an investigation against you to see what you are doing, to see who is paying you, and to see why you are putting the Republic of Serbia in such a position. If the Government of Great Britain is not willing to react, it is not a problem; we will be forced to react.”

That is an unacceptable statement from a Head of State. It is not just a threat to my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton but an intimidation tactic against all MPs. Can you reassure me, Mr Speaker, that no pressure brought to bear outside this place, especially by foreign Governments, will ever endanger the security or privacy of MPs, and that the full weight of Parliament will be used to prevent and dissuade bullying tactics and ensure that MPs can speak the truth? Do you believe, Mr Speaker, that this is a moment at which the Serbian ambassador should be called to explain that position and that statement?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. It is fundamentally a constitutional principle that MPs should be able to speak freely in proceedings of this House. Threats to Members doing their jobs are totally unacceptable, whoever makes them. Beyond that, I remind him that we do not discuss operational security matters in public, and he would not expect me to go further than that, but I will say that, of course, we take this seriously, and Members should, no matter their position—be they a Back Bencher or a Chair of a Select Committee—be able to speak out openly and freely without intimidation.

As a reminder to foreign states: they have no right to threaten anyone in this House. To go a stage further, I am sure that the Treasury Bench will have heard the hon. Gentleman's request to summon the ambassador. As he knows, that decision is not a matter for me, but I have certainly echoed his request for that to take place.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For the past 13 years, I have had the privilege of being the patron of Stockton Rugby Club, a tremendous community organisation that works with more than 500 boys and girls who play the game and runs several youth and adult teams. Today, I am proud to wear the junior academy tie. Would it be in order for me to invite you, Mr Speaker, and colleagues across the House to join me in congratulating the club on its 150th anniversary and wishing it well for the next 150 years?

Mr Speaker: Of course, even if it is rugby union, I am happy to recognise those 150 years of playing rugby. It is just a tragedy that the club did not take up rugby league when the Northern Union was formed but, despite that disappointment, of course I congratulate those at the club—150 years is a significant milestone in any sport.

Privileges Committee Special Report

Mr Speaker: We now come to the privilege motion. No amendments have been selected.

4.4 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): I beg to move,

That this House,

(a) notes with approval the Special Report from the Committee of Privileges;

(b) considers that where the House has agreed to refer a matter relating to individual conduct to the Committee of Privileges, Members of this House should not impugn the integrity of that Committee or its members or attempt to lobby or intimidate those members or to encourage others to do so, since such behaviour undermines the proceedings of the House and is itself capable of being a contempt; and

(c) considers it expedient that the House of Lords is made aware of the Special Report and this Resolution, so that that House can take such action as it deems appropriate.

In accordance with the convention on matters of privilege, as Leader of the House, I have brought forward this motion to facilitate the House's consideration of the first special report of the Privileges Committee, published on 29 June 2023. The motion notes with approval the Committee's special report, and seeks to reaffirm essential principles underpinning the protection of parliamentary privilege and the functioning of this House and its Committees, making it explicit that the House considers that those protections are fundamental to investigations of the Privileges Committee.

Paragraph (c) draws to the attention of the House of Lords the issues raised in the report through a formal message. The House may wish to know that the Leader of the House of Lords has written to me to emphasise that these are serious and important matters, while recognising that each House is responsible for the organisation of its own affairs. The report has been placed in the Lords Library, and I know that my noble Friend Lord True is continuing conversations with others in that House on this important matter.

In my speech on 19 June, I took some time to explain the role of the Privileges Committee and why it matters to all of us here and to our constituents that it exists and that it has people who are prepared to serve on it. In that debate, we also heard some of the things that members of the Committee had to endure while they carried out the duties this House had required of them. I shall not repeat those points, but I wish to make two further points: first, a pre-emptive strike on an issue that may arise during today's debate and, secondly, a personal reflection.

Undermining a Committee should not be confused with the expression of legitimate concerns about the work or its processes. Members must be free to raise such concerns and there are appropriate ways of doing so. Indeed, the Committee's report highlights the various ways this can be done, in particular citing the approach of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who raised matters before, during and after the Committee's original inquiry in a perfectly proper way. If an hon. Member has concerns about any matter of privilege and the internal affairs of this House and its Committees, they may write to the Speaker, who may afford the issue precedence for consideration. Those are the appropriate channels for raising such issues and it is every Member's right to do so.

I would like to highlight that this an exceptional situation. It is not the usual cut and thrust of politics. A special report of the Privileges Committee regarding interference in its work is entirely unprecedented and that has led me to consider the reasons why. Is it perhaps because the nature of politics has changed so much, or because the obligations we have towards one another, and to this place and the esteem in which we hope it is held, are less clear? Perhaps it is because we feel little responsibility towards other right hon. and hon. Members, even those in our own party, and still less for what our words and deeds may encourage others to do outside this place. Is it that personal honour matters less, or good manners? I hope not.

I hope that the colleagues named will reflect on their actions. One of the most painful aspects of this whole affair is that it has involved animosities between colleagues of the same political view, but I know of at least one Member named in the report who has taken the time to speak with regret to some other members of the Committee, and I applaud them for doing so. I hope that some speakers today will acknowledge that obligation we have to one another as colleagues. If Castlereagh and Canning could adopt polite civility after fighting a duel, I live in hope that today will be the end of this sorry affair.

4.9 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Lady.

Over the past few years, the Conservative party has dragged the reputation of this House through the mud and left it festering in the gutter. When the Privileges Committee published its report three weeks ago, which found that Mr Johnson lied to this House and the people of this country, many people must have thought that standards in public life had hit rock bottom—that they could not get any lower. However, the shameful actions of senior Tory MPs, spelled out in the report we are debating today, have damaged the public's trust in Parliament further still.

Some MPs, I am afraid to say, attacked the personal character and integrity of individual members of the Committee from the comfort of their own bully pulpit TV shows. Some accused the Committee of not following due process and did everything they could to whip up an atmosphere of distrust, throwing their toys out of the pram as if it were one rule for them and their friend, and another for everyone else. They were quite wrong. While their attempts to undermine and attack Britain's democratic institutions are shocking, it is important that we remember that they were not successful: this House did vote to approve the Committee's report into Mr Johnson in full and sanction him appropriately. Just like their friend who they were trying to get off the hook, unfortunately, the named MPs are having to be held accountable today for their actions.

I share the desire of the Leader of the House for those Members to use today's debate to set a line and show that they have recognised what they have done, so that we can move on. That matters because we have to approve the report in full. As it says,

“our democracy depends on MPs being able to trust that what Ministers say in the House of Commons is the truth. If Ministers cannot be trusted to tell the truth, the House cannot do its job and the confidence of the public in our whole political system is undermined.”

[*Thangam Debbonaire*]

In other words, telling the truth is the foundation of a functioning Parliament and, when there are allegations that a Minister has not told the truth, we simply must have a mechanism for investigating them. If we did not, there would be no way to hold them to account. That is the role of the Privileges Committee. The motion we are debating today protects the Committee and allows its members to continue to do their job on our behalf when we instruct them to do so. It ensures that they can carry out their work, so that we and the people of this country can trust what Ministers say. This is about protecting democracy.

The motion puts into effect the report's recommendation, aiming to stop MPs putting improper pressure on the Committee and its members in future, because improper pressure was put on the Committee during the inquiry into Mr Johnson. That was an exceptionally important piece of work that went right to the heart of the public's trust in politicians. This report now makes it clear that, to varying degrees—examples are listed clearly in the annex to the report—the named Tory MPs attempted to discredit the Committee and its conclusions, in some cases before they had even seen them, and even pushed for resignations. That ultimately amounted to a co-ordinated campaign by Mr Johnson's allies to influence the outcome of the inquiry in favour of their friend.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Co-ordination of a campaign—where is the evidence of that in the report? It is just an assertion, is it not?

Thangam Debbonaire: I said that it amounted to a co-ordinated campaign, and it did. Every single one of those examples adds up, encouraging others—members of the public and other politicians—to take part. As I have mentioned, that was made worse by the fact that two of those mentioned as mounting the most vociferous attacks did so from the platform of their own TV shows. The named MPs accused the Committee of being a “kangaroo court” and the process of being a “witch hunt”. In reality, as they must know, that could not be further from the truth. The Committee detailed its processes in advance. It took every possible step to ensure fairness. It took legal advice from the right hon. Sir Ernest Ryder, from Speaker's Counsel and from the Clerks of the House on how to

“apply the general principles of fairness, the rules of the House, and...procedural precedents”.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): On the basis of fairness, does the hon. Lady believe it is fair that Members of this House were investigated and listed in a report without prior knowledge that that was going to happen?

Thangam Debbonaire: The Committee was open to the Members concerned making their representations to the Committee in the proper way, and they did not do so. The Committee published a report last summer setting out its intended processes, and Members could have taken part in a number of ways, which I will detail. It made further public comments on its workings when appropriate, and gave Mr Johnson further time to respond to the evidence and make his own submission. In short, the Committee did everything it possibly could to ensure fairness and transparency.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Privileges Committee is meeting, it cannot engage in answering allegations about what it is doing in the press, but has to continue its work until it is completed, and that the rules of the House require that other people should refrain from commenting on it or calling it into disrepute until the actual document is printed and the report has been laid before the House?

Thangam Debbonaire: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. A cursory glance at the Standing Orders of this place would have informed those Members of that.

I do want to take a small moment to put again on record my thanks to the members of the Committee, from all sides of the House, who worked so hard to come to a unanimous conclusion, and to the Clerks who, under considerable pressure, continue to work to uphold the integrity of this House and its standards system.

In my view, the named MPs should apologise. Unfortunately, some of them so far have instead doubled down, claiming that what they have said is merely their exercising their right to freedom of speech. That is absolute nonsense. They tried to interfere in a disciplinary procedure that was voted for unanimously by this House; nobody voted against it. If those Members had wanted to, as the report sets out, there were other legitimate ways open to them as MPs who want to influence any Privileges Committee inquiry. I will refresh their memories: they could have had their say on the MPs appointed to the Committee: they could have opposed the motion instructing the Committee to look into this in the first place; and they could have submitted evidence. There were any number of legitimate avenues open to them, but instead of properly engaging, they pursued illegitimate ways.

I am afraid this all comes back to integrity in politics. Last month, when the Committee published its report into Mr Johnson, the current Prime Minister also had an opportunity to draw a line between him and his predecessor. He could have shown some leadership, he could have pressed the reset button and he could have lived up to his promise of integrity, professionalism and accountability, but, mired in splits and division in his own party, he was too weak to stand up to his former boss.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not think that, in a debate on privileges, perhaps now is not the time to enter into cheap party politics?

Thangam Debbonaire: I have to remind the hon. Gentleman that we are all bound by the same code of conduct, and that includes the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister found time last week to comment on cricket, but could not even find time to comment on the lies of his predecessor—I am responding to the hon. Gentleman—or to the Committee. He could have shown some leadership, but as well as not voting, he could not even bring himself to give us a view.

At the Liaison Committee last week, the Prime Minister said that he had not even read the report. It is not long, and it is about his own MPs. Has he read the report now? Does he understand why this matters so much, and if so, does the Leader of the House know if we will get to hear what he thinks of today's motion? Does he accept the Committee's conclusions? Will he be voting

to approve the report in full? He is the Prime Minister, and this matters because it was a predecessor Prime Minister of his who has brought us to this point by lying to this House. If we want to turn the corner, if we want to move on and if those Conservative Members shaking their heads really want to turn the corner, it matters that the current Prime Minister has failed even to draw a difference between himself and his predecessor.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I feel the hon. Lady did not fully give an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici). How would the hon. Lady feel if, on a Monday, she had a letter from a court saying she had been found guilty, after a court hearing on the Friday, when she had no prior knowledge of it, no summons and no opportunity to give her evidence? Does that feel like natural justice? After all, this is nothing to do with Boris Johnson. That is so last week; this is today.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention because it gives me the opportunity to remind the entire House that this is not a court. It is a procedural Committee that was assessing evidence that was publicly available. We are talking about tweets and TV shows, none of which was hidden.

The Prime Minister also claimed that Lord Goldsmith had quit as a Minister after refusing to apologise for his actions. Lord Goldsmith said that was not true, so which is it? Did the Prime Minister ask him to apologise? More importantly for today's debate, has he asked his own named MPs to apologise, and if not, why not? Will he do so, and has the right hon. Lady, as the Leader of the House, spoken to her colleagues about this?

I end by reiterating that the Privileges Committee is a key piece of Britain's democratic jigsaw. We must not allow the Committee to be caught up in a Tory psychodrama; its work is far too important for that. All credit to all the MPs on that Committee for putting their allegiances to one side and being able to do the work. Labour respects the Committee. We respect the rules and processes of this House. We know that without them, our democracy fractures. I stand ready to vote for the motion today and to approve the report in full, and I urge colleagues in all parts of the House to do the same.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

4.20 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Paragraph 19 of the report reads:

"We consider that the House should maintain its protection of inquiries into individual conduct referred to the Committee of Privileges in the same way that it does those being considered by the House's own Committee on Standards and Independent Expert Panel."

I agree with that.

The motion before us is as recommended in paragraph 20, which was read out by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, and referred to obliquely by the spokesman for the Opposition, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire)—I preferred my right hon. Friend's approach to the issue.

Paragraph 8 lists the ways that

"MPs have control and legitimate means of influence over any Privileges Committee inquiry. They have the right: to object to and vote on Members appointed to the Committee, and subsequently to raise any alleged conflicts of interest on points of order; to vote

against the motion of referral or to seek to amend the motion; to make comments on the Committee's procedure to the Committee itself; to submit evidence to the Committee; and to debate, vote and comment publicly on the Committee's final report once it is published and the investigation is completed."

That paragraph seems pretty comprehensive. I think the report is acceptable, and if the motion comes to a vote, I will support it.

Mr Speaker: We come to the SNP spokesperson.

4.21 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Briefly, I commend the motion on this serious matter, the wording of which was put forward by the Committee of Privileges. As the special report sets out, the Committee is "in practice the only mechanism...which the House can use to defend itself in the face of a Minister misleading it."

Unfortunately, throughout the inquiry into Boris Johnson, the former Prime Minister and several of his close allies sought to discredit the Committee, the integrity of its members and the parliamentary process. Their actions did not affect the outcome of the inquiry—thank goodness—but that should not absolve those individuals of responsibility or scrutiny.

Senior politicians—one of them a Minister at the time, and others of them former Front Benchers—applied "unprecedented and co-ordinated pressure" on the Committee, as the report makes clear, and waged what can only be described as a campaign to disparage it. They took to Twitter, newspapers, radio and even their own TV shows to make their claims, and referred to the inquiry as a "witch hunt" and a "kangaroo court" not befitting a "banana republic". Those are among the jaw-dropping comments listed in the annex to the report. Conservative Members might need to read the annex, because they do not seem familiar with some of those comments.

It is customary for the Privileges Committee to be chaired by a member of the Opposition, yet there were sustained efforts to undermine and question the impartiality of the Chair, who was appointed to the Committee by unanimous decision of the House. The pressure exerted on Conservative Committee members, who made up a majority of the Committee, was clearly intended to force their withdrawal or impede the conclusion of the inquiry.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The hon. Lady said it was customary for the Privileges Committee to be chaired by a member of the Opposition; actually, under Standing Orders, it has to be chaired by a member of the Opposition.

Deidre Brock: I thank the right hon. Lady for that clarification. I agree with her; she is quite right. The report also emphasises the significant personal impact that the campaign had on Members who were simply trying to perform their duties. They should not have been subject to such treatment.

It has hitherto been understood that Members should refrain from interfering in the work of the Privileges Committee, but that was ignored. Explicit protections are already in place for House of Commons standards cases involving alleged breaches of the code of conduct for MPs. When it comes to those cases, Members are

[Deidre Brock]

prohibited from lobbying the Committee on Standards, the Independent Expert Panel or the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. It seems evident from this episode that those safeguards should also be applied to privileges cases.

The claims that the changes would restrict Members' free speech are misguided. Members already have the right to object, to vote and to raise conflicts of interest regarding Committee appointments, as well as to vote against or amend referral motions, to provide evidence, to comment on procedure and to publicly discuss the final report after its publication.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): On the issue of being able to comment, can the hon. Lady define for me what "impugn the integrity" means for what people can say?

Deidre Brock: Forgive me, but the hon. Gentleman is going to have to elaborate a little further.

Richard Fuller: With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will repeat the question. The hon. Lady was talking about the ability to comment, and one of the report's key recommendations is that Members should not

"impugn the integrity of that Committee".

Can she define for me what constitutes impugning integrity?

Deidre Brock: For goodness' sake, that is a ridiculous question. It is clear from the annex attached to this report what impugning the integrity of the Committee means and what it does not. The comments in the report were jaw-dropping. I was shocked that anybody could make such claims when the Committee was in the process of its inquiry.

Getting on to that very point, there are appropriate channels to make our views heard during investigations, and the thing is—Members on the Government Benches do not appear to appreciate this—that this whole saga has further undermined the public's faith and trust in not just this place, but in democracy itself. It can only fuel the existing sense of cynicism and frustration that we see across society in the UK today.

Boris Johnson was shown to have lied to the House and to the Privileges Committee, yet some of his most ardent supporters sought to interfere, undermine and attack the integrity of the Committee and its work. It seems appropriate, as I said, to consider whether such campaigns should result in disciplinary action. It is no wonder the public are scunnered with it. This whole saga has undermined people's faith in this place and in democracy itself. The Prime Minister and most of his Cabinet were not here for the vote on the Committee's findings on Johnson, and the Government Front Bench is sadly looking pretty empty again today. As one of my constituents put it to me in a surgery just days ago, "If those at the very top won't bother observing or even showing their support for the rules, why should we?". That leads us to a dangerous place indeed. We support the motion.

4.27 pm

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): There are some issues with this report, beginning, as it happens, with its title referring to a "Co-ordinated campaign of interference". As was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), there is no evidence that it was co-ordinated. Speaking on my own account—I may get support on this from the Whip on duty and, indeed, the 10 Downing Street press office, were it able to comment—I am not often co-ordinated with the official line to take. Indeed, I have always thought it politically important that Members should be independent in what they say and how they vote. Therefore, to make an assertion of co-ordination without evidence is a problem with this report, but it is not the only problem.

I question footnote 1 on the bona fides of this report. It states:

"The Committee of Privileges is not able to initiate inquiries on its own initiative, but once matters are referred to the House it has 'power to inquire not only into the matter of the particular complaint, but also into facts surrounding and reasonably connected with the matter of the particular complaint, and into the principles of the law and custom of privilege that are concerned' (CJ (1947-48) 22, 30 October 1947)."

However, that is surely superseded by the vote in 1978 on how privilege matters should be dealt with. Paragraph 15.32 of "Erskine May" sets out the procedure and explains why it is as complex as it is. It states:

"The procedure is designed to prevent frivolous complaints of breach of privilege. The following safeguards are in place: the Committee of Privileges does not have power to inquire at will, but can only deal with complaints which are referred to it; decisions as to whether to refer a matter of privilege to the Committee of Privileges are taken by the House as a whole; and Members require the permission of the Speaker to raise a matter of privilege."

That was not done, and the 1947 Commons *Journal* entry was preferred to the 1978 motion. That seems to me to have been a mistake. That is not to say that this is necessarily not a serious matter, but the whole reason for the procedures is to ensure that only serious matters are subject to these reports. Why did the Committee not follow the procedure properly set out by the House in 1978? Why were the safeguards ignored?

That is before we come to the matter raised by others about individuals being named and referred to without any ability to answer. I am not too worried about that. I have said things on the public record, and if people want to quote me and wish to refer to my television programme on GB News, which they may be jealous of, or whatever other concerns they may have, that is absolutely fine. I do not mind that personally, but I do mind that people say they are following the procedures of the House when the procedures seem to be rather different in "Erskine May".

There is also a modest discourtesy to the House of Lords. The House of Lords has exclusive cognisance, and implied criticisms of peers are against the practice of this House, and that is unfortunate. That is unfortunate more from our point of view than from theirs. Why do we have this idea of exclusive cognisance so clearly in mind? It is because in the days of the Supreme Court being the House of Lords, ultimately membership of this House would have been determined by the other House. We have therefore always jealously guarded our

right of exclusive cognisance, but, in return, we have given it to their lordships. I am concerned that the report has touched and trespassed on that.

Dame Angela Eagle: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: It would be an honour, delight, joy to give way.

Dame Angela Eagle: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has referred to the Privileges Committee—it notes this in the report—as a kangaroo court. He said:

“I think it makes kangaroo courts look respectable.”

He also referred to the members of the Privileges Committee during its hearings as “marsupials”. On reflection, might he like to apologise for that use of language?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady kindly leads me to what I was going to say next. I had absolutely no desire to impugn the integrity of individual members of the Committee, some of whom I hold in very high regard.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree, or will he at least acknowledge, that comments made by Members named in the special report raised the risk significantly of harm to members of the Privileges Committee, to the extent that the Parliamentary Security Department felt it necessary to carry out an urgent review of their personal safety, constituency offices, constituency events and homes?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: Many Members of this House have faced issues with security. I do not believe that criticising the actions of a Committee has that effect. If the hon. Gentleman really takes that route, we will have to agree with each other the whole time. Admirable though I thought the Leader of the House’s request was that we should get on better, I am afraid that was knocked for six by the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), in her rather cantankerous comments that followed.

I want to make it clear that I had no intention to impugn the individual members of the Committee. I do indeed hold many of them in the highest regard. I served on the House of Commons Commission with my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) and on the Privileges Committee, under his chairmanship, with the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue). I have always thought it is important to get on well with people across the House and to be courteous to them, as the Lord President of the Council suggested, but that does not mean that one cannot criticise them. It was legitimate and it is legitimate to question the position of the Chairman of the Committee. We must be clear about that.

In the previous debate, I quoted at some length the House of Lords setting aside the Lord Hoffmann judgment because of his association with Amnesty International. That made it very clear that the question was the risk of the appearance of partiality. It did not question Lord Hoffmann as a man of honour and integrity, and I certainly do not question the honour and integrity of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is a most distinguished Member of this House, but I do not think that she was

wise to serve as Chairman of a Committee when she had tweeted her views. We have just heard from the shadow Leader of the House how shocking it is to tweet anything, but it is all right for someone to tweet something when it prejudices a case they are about to hear. That seems to make no sense.

I question the report further. As the Father of the House noted, paragraph 8 sets out how we may question the Committee. However, footnote 10 in paragraph 15 seems to object that I did exactly that in the debate that followed the Committee’s report. The previous Prime Minister used to get accused of cakeism, but that seems to be an extreme level of cakeism. The position of the Chairman was fundamental. As it says in Galatians,

“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am listening with interest, although at times the precision could be greater. The Privileges Committee matter mentioned in the footnote referred to Mr Johnson being referred to the Committee rather than this report, which followed subsequent events. I also read footnote 10 on page six, to which my right hon. Friend refers, as explaining the answer to the question he raised over Hoffman, not supporting what he said about Hoffman. Was I wrong?

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg: I was pointing out that, from a reading of paragraph 15, what I said is seen as part of a sustained attempt to undermine and challenge the impartiality of the Chairman in the very debate in which, under paragraph 8, we are allowed to make criticisms once the report has been brought to the House. It is a very odd footnote at the very least, and unclear about what it is trying to achieve.

The problem with the Chairman’s position was that it undermined the whole validity of the Committee, because it is well known that if a body comes to a conclusion, with one person on it whose partiality is questionable, the whole process is then nullified and needs to start again. There is also, as we know, currently an investigation into my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), but that was not known during the course of the Committee’s deliberations. Therefore, nobody could raise that as a question of impugning his integrity until, as I understand it, the report was completed. There may have raised questions and there may have been valid questions to raise, but they were certainly not raised by me or by any others.

Let us delve into the details of the report. It bases its privilege claims on “Erskine May”, but I have a nasty feeling that the Committee read just the headline of “Erskine May” without reading the relevant footnotes and examining the Commons *Journal* to see what they refer to. I have done that, with considerable help from the Library and the Journal Office. Footnotes 5 and 6 of the report point to “Erskine May”, 25th edition, paragraph 15.14. That paragraph has 35 further footnotes. The House may be relieved to know that I will not go through them all, because many are irrelevant to the report.

The footnotes deal with matters such as assaulting Members en route to Parliament, which is deemed a breach of privilege—one that seems to happen most days to some, but never mind. It is a breach of privilege of great antiquity that the Committee seems unconcerned about. The footnotes deal with reflections on the

[Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg]

Lord Chancellor or allegations of corruption—none of that applies. However, notes 4, 7, 21, 22, 26 and 27 are worth looking at. Note 4 concerns “insulting or abusive language”. The first example cited comes from 1646. We are making a claim for privilege based on a time when this House was at war. And what was it? The claim was that one Francis Godolphin—a turncoat who had been ruling on the Isles of Scilly—should not in future be criticised because he now supports the House of Commons. The House of Commons was protecting one of its own in a time of war. That is hardly the greatest precedent for Committee members not being able to withstand a little criticism today.

In 1660, there was rudeness in the Lobby—an outsider was rude to a Member in the Lobby, and Members were very shocked. In 1877, Dr Kenealy was rude to another Member in the Lobby and was forced to apologise. Likewise, in 1887, Dr Tanner was rude to another Member in the Lobby. On that occasion, the motion of censure was withdrawn. There is a clear precedent, I accept, that we are not allowed to be rude to fellow Members in the Lobby. I was very careful throughout this whole process—had I done other, there would have been grounds for complaint—not to talk to any members of the Committee about what was in front of their Committee. That, it seems to me, would have been improper and private lobbying that should not take place. I was careful, as I say, not to do that, in spite of the fact that inevitably I met one or two of the Conservative members on many occasions during this process. That seems to me to be covered in broad terms by what is set out in footnote 4.

We come now to footnote 7. Footnote 7 is why I think the Committee did not bother reading the footnotes, because—if this is not my proudest achievement in Parliament, I do not know what is—I have actually discovered a mistake in “Erskine May”. I see the Clerks at the Table almost swooning with horror at that thought. I thank the Commons Journal Office for pointing this out. The footnote quotes the 1862-63 *Journal*; it is in fact the 1863-64 *Journal* when a Mr Reed was summoned to apologise to the House for writing a rude letter to a Member of Parliament. Madam Deputy Speaker, what a pity the Privileges Committee has not got on to that! Just think how busy it would be if it looked into every rude letter sent to a Member of Parliament by a constituent. Perhaps it should have done a rolling report, with powers accrued to itself to do that. I might have one or two I could send in myself. One or two remainers write to me in the most excoriating terms, but I am afraid I have always taken that as part of the flotsam and jetsam of political life.

If we go to 1890, a Mr Atkinson was suspended for seven days for offending the Speaker, both on the Floor of the House and in correspondence. Epistolary offence was given to Mr Speaker. That is a much more serious matter—surely, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would agree with this—than it is to argue with a member of a Committee, or indeed even the Chairman of a Committee. In 1781, the wonderfully named Theophilus Swift was called to the Bar and had to apologise for causing offence, and a couple of duels were claimed by Members against Members. In 1845, Mr Somers, the Member for Sligo, challenged Mr Roebuck, the Member for Bath; and in 1862, a rude letter was sent to Sir Robert Peel by The

O'Donoghue, the MP for Tipperary. These were considered to be great breaches of privilege, though only apologies were required—no further sanction. There was a challenge from Mr O'Kelly, who apologised to Mr McCoan for another duel.

A Mr France was admonished at the Bar in 1874 for being rude about the Chairman of a Committee, but in 1968-69 it was deemed that criticising the impartiality of the Chairman of a Sub-Committee was not contempt of Parliament, when it was thought the issue faced by the Chairman of the said Sub-Committee was one where he had a constituency interest and therefore could not be impartial. So I would say—it is unlike me to be such a modernist—that the more modern precedent is on the side of being able to challenge the position of a Chairman of a Committee.

In 1900, there was a letter written by a non-Member about a Select Committee on Government contracting being partial. It was deemed a breach and motions were put, but what did the House decide? The House decided not to vote in favour of the motion, or on the amendment to the motion, but that it now proceed with the business of the day. Once again the House in recent centuries, let alone decades, has become less and less prissy about this type of privilege, because it risks ridicule when it stands upon its honour in this way.

In 1901 and 1926, there were arguments with the *Daily Mail*—some things never change. It was suggested that the editor of the *Daily Mail* be brought to the Bar of the House. I believe the Bar is the gift of Jamaica. If we pull it out—which we are not meant to do, because it usually has a sign on it when the House is not sitting saying, “Please do not touch”, although I confess I have pulled it out and it is very interesting to see—it says it is the gift of Jamaica. The editor of the *Daily Mail* was not called in. In 1901 he said that had a Member of Parliament criticised him outside of the House in the way he had been criticised in the House, he would have sued for libel. That was deemed to be threatening, but he was not called in.

Perhaps my favourite case is from 1880. It is a very interesting case. A certain Mr Plimsoll put out a leaflet to the electors of Westminster wherein he said that Sir Charles Russell, the Member of Parliament for Westminster, had used a parliamentary tactic to stop a vote on a Bill. Some of us who come on Fridays—I am looking to catch the eye of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope)—may think that using tactical efforts to stop Bills is not such a bad thing altogether, but Mr Plimsoll took offence at it and put out a rude leaflet. This was brought to the attention of the House, and the House voted:

“That, in the opinion of this House, the conduct of the honourable Member for Derby in publishing printed placards denouncing the part taken by two honourable Members of this House in the proceedings of the House was calculated to interfere with the due discharge of the duties of a Member of this House and is a breach of its Privileges:—But this House, having regard to the withdrawal by the honourable Member for Derby of the expressions to which the honourable Member for Westminster has drawn its attention, is of opinion that no further action on its part is necessary.”—[*Official Report*, 20 February 1880; Vol. 250, c. 1114.]

I wonder whether hon. Members have worked out what the Bill was that Mr Plimsoll was bringing forward, for which he had to apologise to the House—a precedent quoted indirectly by this report, favourably. Mr Plimsoll

was trying to get a Bill through to put the Plimsoll line on ships to save hundreds of lives, and this House criticised him for breach of privilege.

We should be very wary of standing on our dignity, because this House is the cockpit of freedom of speech. It is where democracy must run. When we try to silence people because they say things that we do not like, we risk looking ridiculous.

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

4.46 pm

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for tabling the motion, which arises out of the special report of the Privileges Committee.

When it approved with an emphatic majority the report of our inquiry into Boris Johnson, the House made it clear beyond doubt that honesty in our Parliament matters, that Ministers are required to be truthful and that there will be consequences for any Minister who is not. The House was endorsing the outcome of the Committee that it had mandated to undertake that inquiry.

The present motion asks the House to give its approval to our special report, because we want to make sure, if the House ever again mandates the Privileges Committee to undertake an inquiry into a Member, that there will be Members who are willing to serve on the Committee, and that the Committee and its processes are protected while an inquiry is under way so that the Committee is able to undertake its work in the way that the House wants. The motion makes it clear that when a Privileges Committee inquiry is ongoing, Members should not lobby, intimidate or attack the integrity of the Committee. They should not try to influence the outcome of the inquiry or undermine the standing of the Committee, because that undermines the proceedings of the House.

No Member needs to feel disempowered by this. On the contrary, Members own the entire process. Any Member can object to a Member being appointed to the Privileges Committee. Any Member can speak and vote against any reference to the Privileges Committee or the terms of any reference. Any Member can give evidence to the Committee. Any Member can debate and vote on the report of any inquiry.

This is not a process imposed on the House by the Privileges Committee. The opposite is the case: it is the House that imposes this responsibility on the Privileges Committee. It is the House that chooses the members of the Committee; it is the House that decides on an inquiry and its terms of reference; and it is the House, by its Standing Orders and precedents, that lays down the processes that will apply.

Our special report makes it clear that it is not acceptable for Members, fearing an outcome that they do not want, to level criticisms at the Committee so that in the event that the conclusion is the one that they do not want, they will have undermined the inquiry's outcome by undermining confidence in the Committee.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): As the right hon. and learned Lady knows from our exchange of letters in recent days, I was named in the annex to the

report for a tweet that did not refer to the Committee. The context of the Twitter thread is clear. She talks about hon. Members being able to give evidence to the Committee, but we had no prior notification that we might be named. I was alerted to my presence in the report by the press. I just wonder how she considers that Members like me might be able to seek redress in such circumstances.

Ms Harman: The hon. Gentleman named himself on Twitter by calling the Committee a “witch hunt”, and that was in the public domain. The thread ahead of his tweet was quite clear, so we simply put it in our report. We took what was in the public domain and put it in our report.

Our special report makes it clear that it is not acceptable for a Member of this House who does not want a particular outcome to seek, by pressure or lobbying, to influence the Committee's decision.

Mark Jenkinson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I fear that the right hon. and learned Lady may have just inadvertently misled the House by suggesting that I called the Committee a “witch hunt”. There was no reference to the Committee, and the four-part Twitter thread is quite clear that it was not in relation to the Committee or its investigations. I wonder how I might seek redress on this matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I do not know whether he was here at the beginning but, if he was and if he wishes to speak later, he can catch my eye. He has already made his point, and I think the right hon. and learned Member is addressing that point.

Ms Harman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) is saying that he does not believe the Privileges Committee's inquiry into Boris Johnson was a witch hunt, I warmly welcome the fact that he has said so. I thank him for putting it on the record that he does not believe our inquiry was a witch hunt.

Michael Fabricant: Does the right hon. and learned Lady not think it would have been courteous of the Committee to warn those listed in the annex that they were going to be listed? If a mistake had been made, it would have given those people an opportunity to make their point before the Committee's report was published. Would that not have been fairer?

Ms Harman: The points and issues that we included in the annex to our report were put in the public domain on Twitter. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman himself put into the public domain that, in relation to the Committee, there was a question of “malice and prejudice”. He felt it was important to put that on to the public record.

Michael Fabricant: Will the right hon. and learned Lady give way?

Ms Harman: I think the hon. Gentleman will be making a speech.

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is totally—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I have not called the hon. Gentleman to make a point of order. If the right hon. and learned Member does not want to give way, which is her right, it is detrimental to the debate if Members who cannot get their own way then make a point of order.

Michael Fabricant: But I am making a point of order.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Make your point of order.

Michael Fabricant: My point of order is that it is also discourteous to partly quote something, actually. And what it clearly—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. That is not a point of order. He is addressing it directly to the right hon. and learned Lady, not to me. No more of that, thank you.

Ms Harman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) wants to say that he does not believe the Committee was motivated by malice and prejudice, we would warmly welcome that correction.

Our special report makes it clear that it is not acceptable for a Member of this House who does not want a particular outcome to seek, by pressure or lobbying, to influence the Committee's decision. The House, by supporting this motion tonight, will be making it clear that, in such an inquiry, the Committee's responsibility is to gather the evidence, and that it is the evidence that must prevail. That is the only basis on which a decision should be made. Members must not try to wreck the process by pressing Committee members to resign.

If members of the Committee are not prepared to undertake such inquiries, the House would have no protection from those who mislead it. I have nothing but admiration for my colleagues on the Privileges Committee, particularly the Conservative Members. Despite the pressure they were subjected to, they were unflinching. They came to each of our more than 30 meetings and persisted to the conclusion of the inquiry with a complete and total focus, which was a credit to the House. They gathered the evidence, analysed it and based their decision on it, exactly in the way that the House requires them to. That was then put to the House.

By supporting this motion tonight, the House will be making it clear that when it appoints members to the Committee, those members will have the support of the House to carry out their work. They are doing a worthy thing by serving on the Privileges Committee.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I appreciate what a difficult job the Committee has—I fully respect that—and, of course, the original Chair did recuse himself from the inquiry. When the original report was put before the House, the right hon. and learned Lady stated that she had received assurances from the Government that she would remain in that position, but she did not elaborate on that at the time. Will she therefore use today as an opportunity to inform the House as to what assurances she had been given and by whom?

Ms Harman: Is the hon. Gentleman, in what he has said, withdrawing what he said on Twitter, which was that the Committee was a

“witch-hunt which would put a banana republic to shame”?

That is what he actually said.

Committee members are entitled to the support of the House, because it is the House that has asked them to undertake this work.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): As a former Leader of the House, and having both spoken for and voted for the report by the Privileges Committee, which the House did commission, I am afraid that I do not accept the premise that the right hon. and learned Lady, for whom I have a great deal of time and respect, is putting forward today, which is that the Committee, as a result of being asked by the House to look into the behaviour by one of its Members, should therefore be absolutely immune from any form of free speech whatsoever. I cannot agree with her on that basis and will not be supporting the Committee's report today.

Ms Harman: Perhaps I may reiterate that we are not saying that the Committee is immune. We are saying that it is evident that any Member of the House can challenge the appointment to the Committee of any member of the Committee, which frequently happens; that any Member of the House can challenge a reference to the Privileges Committee, and that, too, does happen; and that Members can challenge the terms of reference to the Committee and raise concerns about the procedure. But what Members cannot do is say that something is a witch hunt and a kangaroo court, and that there is collusion; impugn the integrity of the individual members of the Committee; and also undermine the standing of the Committee, because that is undermining the proceedings of the House. If hon. Members are not sure what “impugn” means, they can look at “Erskine May”, which goes into it in great detail—

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I am sorry that the right hon. and learned Lady is being continually interrupted, but may I ask her for some clarity on the point she is making? She has mentioned impugning the integrity of members of the Committee in part of the motion, with which I have considerable sympathy. I just want to understand this point. I do not suggest that this has happened here or at any time in the past, but she will recognise that it is conceivable that it would be right to impugn the integrity of a member of the Committee, or of more than one of its members, if there were evidence to do so. May I just be clear that what this motion should be taken to mean is that someone should not impugn the integrity of members of the Committee while an inquiry is ongoing? If there is evidence to do so later, there are mechanisms by which we can do so. We should be clear, should we not, that what this motion means is that while an inquiry is ongoing, it is wrong to impugn the integrity of any member of the Committee?

Ms Harman: That is absolutely right, and that is so that the Committee can do its business properly, as mandated by the House, as is the case with the Standards Committee. We cannot have a situation where Members

are reluctant to serve on the Committee because, as soon as they undertake an inquiry, it is open season on them. We cannot have a situation where the outcome is based on pressure and lobbying, rather than the gathering and consideration of the evidence.

The motion does not create any new categories of contempt, nor does it extend what can be regarded as contempt. It simply makes it explicit that the focused, time-limited protection that the House has already made explicit for standards cases is the same for privilege cases.

Dame Angela Eagle: Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that if the motion were not to go through, and it was to be open season on all future members of the Privileges Committee during inquiries, the only recourse for this House to ensure that it was not lied to in future would be to have an outside system to assess that, which would be constitutionally novel and—I think—highly dangerous?

Ms Harman: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. If this work of the Privileges Committee is to be done in-house by Members of this House, this House must support them in that work. If the House is not prepared to do that, and it is open season on Members who are put forward for the Committee, we would very quickly find ourselves with an independent, outside process. Most Members of the House want us to keep the process in-house, but to do that we must all respect it.

Lia Nici: The right hon. and learned Lady talks about collusion and lobbying. Can she explain how it was that *Guardian* reporters were briefed before Privileges Committee reports were published for us in this place, and, if she knows who had sight of those reports, who was doing the collusion with those journalists?

Ms Harman: Again, this is very unfortunate. I say to the hon. Lady that hon. Members are given a task to do on behalf of the House. They do it to the best of their ability, with integrity, and they should be supported in doing that. Although the hon. Lady was very much against the outcome, which came about on the basis of the evidence, it is not acceptable then to criticise the process, except through the channels and in the ways that I have set out.

Our special report draws upon “Erskine May”. I invite hon. and right hon. Members to read paragraphs 15.14 and 15.16 of “Erskine May”, which make it crystal clear that it is not acceptable for a Member of this House to seek, by lobbying or arousing public hostility, to influence the decision of members of the Committee, or to undermine the Committee’s credibility and authority. All this is about protecting the House from being misled, by ensuring that there is a strong and fair Committee that will, on behalf of the House, undertake an inquiry, and that there are Members prepared to serve on the Committee and able to do that work without interference.

Mr Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): We heard his name mentioned earlier, in respect of the previous report, but will the right hon. and learned Lady confirm that Sir Ernest Ryder was still in place for the preparation of this special report, that he agreed with the findings of

the Committee, and that he found that there was nothing improper about the work of the Committee in this report?

Ms Harman: Yes, Sir Ernest Ryder, who provided us with advice for the fifth report, which was the substantive report into Boris Johnson, also provided us with advice for this special report, for which we are grateful. We also had expert advice from the Clerks, including at the most senior level, so that we could be absolutely certain that we were complying with all the rules and processes laid down by the House.

The objective here is not to protect members of the Privileges Committee. It is even more important and fundamental than that. The objective is to protect this House and thereby to protect our democracy, so I commend this motion to the House.

5.4 pm

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): The motion before the House is proportionate: it seeks only to provide the Privileges Committee, once it is established and sitting, with the same protections enjoyed by the Standards Committee. That is all it does. All colleagues respect the Standards Committee when it is sitting. I hope that we can extend that respect to the Privileges Committee and that the motion is carried.

I was struck by what the Leader of the House said in her speech. I wrote three or four speeches for this afternoon’s debate—some reflective, some angry and some defensive—but I have put them all aside.

You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the former Prime Minister, was a great friend of mine—one of my greatest friends in politics. I fought tooth and nail, with every fibre in my body, to keep her in No. 10. I turned up whenever I was needed, to do whatever needed to be done, but we lost—that battle was lost.

I see my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), the chair of the 1922 committee, in the Chamber. Very quickly, the late Dame Cheryl Gillan and I were thrust into being acting chairs of the 1922 committee, and we oversaw the contest for the new leader of the party. The former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was successful; I was one of five people, including my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West, present when, de facto, he became leader of our party and, de facto, the following day, Prime Minister. That was 24 July 2019.

That day, or shortly afterwards, I was in the Tea Room having supper with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, the former Prime Minister, when in bounced the then Secretary of State for Transport, my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps). He has been my political neighbour for 18 and a half years. Sometimes we are the best of friends; sometimes we are the best of enemies. When we fall out, we normally find an accommodation that allows us to become friends again.

You may recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that in 2018, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield was the first to call for the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, to

[Sir Charles Walker]

stand down. So when he bounced into the Tea Room, the day she ceased to be Prime Minister, or a few days later, and sat down with his supper, I thought, “Oh my word. This is going to be pretty tasty”—not the supper, the conversation. I thought there would be fireworks, because my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead, unencumbered by the office of Prime Minister, could really have a go at my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield, my next door neighbour in Hertfordshire. The former Prime Minister fixed him with a steely eye and said, “Now, Mr Shapps, I have a small station in my constituency that needs some investment. What are you going to do for me?”

In this place, we are judged not by how we handle our successes, but by how we cope with our disappointments. In that Tea Room exchange, I learned so much about character, courage, humility and dignity. To return to the motion, I hope that it is passed tonight. There is a lot of upset and grievance on the Government side of the House, but eventually we have to cast that to one side and move forward.

5.8 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—Madam Deputy Speaker, sorry. I think I got my pronouns mixed up. I rise to support the motion before us today. I am glad that there are no amendments to it, because it is the motion that the Privileges Committee asked to be put before the House in its special report. It is very important that “this House notes with approval the Special Report”.

For us to do that will give us the best chance as a democratic House to put what has been an unprecedented period behind us. It is not usual, as we all know, for a Prime Minister to agree that a Privileges Committee report into what he said on the Floor of this House be sent to the Privileges Committee, as happened in April 2022, with the unanimous support of the House. It is not usual for a Privileges Committee report to involve such high stakes as the one that the members of the Privileges Committee—many of them are sitting here listening to this debate—had to cope with. We have never in my experience—I am not sure that it is even in the history books—had a Privileges Committee of any Parliament put in quite that position. It is therefore to the credit of this House—

Craig Mackinlay: Just while we are discussing semantics—I am referring to the interaction that we had on what “impugn” might mean—the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) mentioned the words, “with approval”. My interpretation of “with approval” is that every word in this motion is absolute and correct. I have to say that, having heard the evidence, on the first occasion that my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) has been able to speak as part of this evidence, he raised doubts about what has been published as supposedly coming from him. Am I getting this wrong? My interpretation of approval is that it is all absolutely correct. If that is the case, I am afraid that I have doubts on that front.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will do what he thinks is right—I think we can all guess what that will be—when we vote. I note that the way in

which this House has traditionally worked is that there are Standing Orders and there is Erskine May, but there are also unwritten assurances about how this House should behave when these issues are before it. Certainly, the Leader of the House was correct to ask, rather philosophically, at the beginning of this debate what had changed to cause the emergence of behaviour that I would not have expected to see when I first came into this House 31 years ago. I would not have expected to see people’s integrity being impugned in quite the way that it has been while they were doing duties that this House had unanimously asked them to do. But, of course, social media did not exist when I first came into this House, and neither did GB News. Before things get any more heated, we need to stop and think about the consequences of allowing the behaviour that we have seen in the past few months, as the Privileges Committee has done its report, to continue.

It is to the credit of this House that the Privileges Committee’s original report—its fifth report—was debated and carried by such a majority. That puts a line in the sand. It enables us to begin to rebuild the reputation of this House and to use the Privileges Committee to ensure that this House can police itself on the Floor in the Chamber and bring Ministers to account by insisting that they tell the truth.

The special report, again as the Leader of the House pointed out, is unprecedented, because people have never behaved this way in the past when a Privileges Committee was attempting to carry out the duty that was given to it by a motion that was passed unanimously by the House. It is important, given that similar rules apply to the Committee on Standards, that, in what I hope will be the rare occasions in the future when the Privileges Committee may have to meet to do its job and be convened, it will be allowed to do so.

As I said to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), if we cannot restore the respect that the Privileges Committee must have to do its job in future, we will have to create an outside body to do it. That would be a very profound constitutional change, with far greater implications for the freedom of people to speak in this House than simply abiding by decency, courtesy and proper rules when the Privileges Committee is meeting.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Why on earth would outside individuals want to serve on such a body, if they are to be subjected to the kinds of public abuse that we have seen in this case?

Dame Angela Eagle: That is the problem, and I think the special report has done us a service by bringing it to the attention of this House. It is something we have to think about as we consider the motion.

We have been living through febrile times. We have seen two Members of this House assassinated in the past few years while doing their jobs. There is a lot of anger and controversy out there, wound up and heated up by the way social media works. I think everybody in this House, especially those who have been subjected to some of those outside pressures—there will be many Members of this House who have—needs to think very carefully about how they conduct themselves and the kinds of words they use.

If there is no respect in this House for the Privileges Committee and the things that we try to do to maintain good behaviour and decency in this House, there will be even less respect outside, and that will damage our ability to ensure that our democracy works properly, because without truth there is no democracy. Although this looks like quite a small report, it is a very significant one, and it is important that Members on all sides of the House, whatever faction they are in, consider seriously the implications of not voting for the motion tonight.

I have to say that, now that a little of the heat has gone out of the situation, I would have liked to see the Members mentioned in the report have the good grace to stand up and apologise to the House for some of the language they have used, such as kangaroo courts, marsupials and comments about “calibre, malice and prejudice”. The House voted for the members of the Committee to be tasked with a very difficult job. Nobody in their right mind would want to find themselves in that position. It is not a nice way to spend parliamentary time—much less attending 30 meetings, under enormous stress and with the outside social media pressures coming in at them from all angles.

As someone who stood against the leader of my party, I can tell hon. Members that I have had some experience of how that works out. I have also had experience of how what one does in here can translate out there into threatening behaviour and difficulties—[HON. MEMBERS: “We all have!”] Yes, and I said that earlier in my speech, if Conservative Members were listening.

Therefore, no matter how high the stakes, it is extremely important that when Members comment, they do so within the Standing Orders and the rules of this House, and that they save comments about witch-hunts, kangaroo courts, malice and the rest of it for when the Committee has reported. One unique thing about this House is that while a report is being compiled and evidence is being collected, that Committee cannot respond to what is being put to it in a 24-hour news cycle. It must wait and let its report do the talking.

I suspect that those Members who tried to blacken the names of those compiling the report, and unleash that kind of process against them, knew exactly what they were doing and knew exactly the pressure they were trying to bring to bear. It is absolutely shameful that some Members named in the report indulged in that kind of behaviour, including two ex-Cabinet Ministers, members of the Privy Council and an ex-Leader of the House—the right hon. Member for North East Somerset—who knows better, and who knows that he knows better than to behave in that way.

When I came to this House, I never thought that I would see such behaviour. It is to the great detriment of Conservative Members that we have seen such behaviour. I ask them, one last time, to have the grace to get up during the debate and apologise to the House for the way in which they behaved prior to the Privileges Committee publishing its report, and give us an assurance that they will not do it again.

5.20 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I have found the debate thus far more than interesting for a number of reasons. A great deal has been said and commented upon in terms of parliamentary procedure and respect for one

another, both of which I absolutely support, but also in terms of some of the selective quotes in the report, which have been echoed today, and how they are ascribed to certain Members who have been named in the report. Some of it has been taken out of context, and I will reflect on that point. I do not think that it is healthy for this wonderful Parliament to end up making generalised assumptions and assertions about individuals based on the annex to the report. That is why I wanted to speak today.

Clearly, I am named in the annex and referenced in paragraph 14. As someone who has had claims made about their actions in the report, and who has been named and had judgments passed on their conduct both by the Committee and so far in the debate—totally inaccurate judgments, if I may say so—I think it is right that I get, at least, a right of reply. I am incredibly respectful of process, not just because I have served in Government, but because being a parliamentarian is the greatest honour we all have, and upholding our traditions, our democracy and parliamentary standards is absolutely right. However, although I appreciate that right hon. and hon. Members may disagree with me, including the Chair of the Committee, who is entitled to do so, I feel that the assertions and claims made in this special report are wrong and cannot be substantiated by the so-called evidence that has been produced and published.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Did my right hon. Friend collude in any way with any of the persons listed in the report, or with anyone else, to place pressure on the Committee?

Priti Patel: That comes back to the evidence and the point that I was about to make. The answer is: absolutely not. I just do not think it appropriate that, unless the evidence is provided and published, there is an absence of process by the Committee. I do not know if the annex is an exhaustive list of Members of this House—the Chair of the Committee is very welcome to respond to my comments—but it seems quite selective and exclusive. That is why it is important to have this debate and discussion.

Allan Dorans: On 16 March 2023, during an interview on GB News, the right hon. Lady said:

“the lack of accountability...I think there is a culture of collusion quite frankly involved here.”

Can I have some evidence of that please?

Priti Patel: I will come to that particular quote, so the hon. Gentleman will hear what I have to say then.

I come back to my point on whether the annex is conclusive. Should other individuals in the House have been included in it? On what basis were decisions made? At the outset I put it clearly on the record that it is wrong of Members to seek to place undue and improper pressure on any Members investigating matters at a Committee level. There are processes in place, and it is right that they should be respected. I believe that there is a case for looking at how the processes of this Committee can be clarified, and how the members of that Committee and the persons who are subject to inquiries are protected. From my experience of the handling of all this, I can say that to be named in a report having had no notification—no correspondence or anything of that nature—that I was being investigated for prior conduct—

Thangam Debbonaire indicated dissent.

Priti Patel: The shadow Leader of the House shakes her head, but I just do not think that that is acceptable. We have heard great speeches on having respect for one another, and I agree completely. We must treat each other with civility: if we intend to name another Member in the Chamber, we let them know beforehand. That is an important part of the process.

We have heard about lobbying and collusion. As one who has served in government, as Home Secretary, I have been involved in all sorts of quasi-judicial policy and decision making on high-profile and complex issues, day in, day out, much of which was the subject of quite active lobbying by Opposition Members. We live in a democracy, and we should be able to have these discussions. All Ministers know that orchestrated campaigns and lobbying are absolutely day-to-day things that go on; that is part of a democracy—the values and safeguards of free speech and freedom of expression. A democracy recognises the value and the importance of challenging and questioning processes and decision making. That is one reason why we are all here as elected Members of Parliament: we do this on behalf of our country and our constituents, and because we have a democratic responsibility to do it.

In doing that, we raise uncomfortable questions all the time. That is what we do, day in, day out. To silence and cancel out the comments and voices of individuals carries great risk, and I am very worried about that. It causes me grave concern. That is why the decision on the motion must be taken carefully.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady is making a good case that we need to treat each other with respect. Is claiming that a Committee has been involved in collusion, as she did on GB News, part of that respect?

Priti Patel indicated dissent.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Well, it is what is written here. Does the right hon. Lady deny that she said it?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

It is important that there is due process, and it seems to me that the report does not deliver the guidance and the processes that would be helpful to the House when dealing with matters that have been considered by the Privileges Committee. That is because the report is not concerned with establishing or recommending new processes and protections, and we should not sit here pretending that it is. This report has been used by the Committee to criticise and censure individuals. The House should reflect on that in the light of my comments.

The House will set, in my view, a dangerous precedent if it approves a report that censures and passes judgment on Members of the House without granting due process—fair due process, I should add—to the Members it makes allegations about.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that I was a member of the Committee. Along with every other member of the Committee, I was clear that there is no censure in the report. Will she clarify what she means by censure? That was certainly not what the Committee intended.

Priti Patel: By that, I mean cancelling out views and opinions. That is totally different—

Dame Angela Eagle indicated dissent.

Priti Patel: Would the hon. Lady like to intervene? She is very welcome to. She has spoken. With respect, she also asked for civility in the Chamber and in the way in which we engage with one another. Everyone has strong opinions and, with that, it is right and respectful that we listen to each other.

Andy Carter rose—

Dame Angela Eagle: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Priti Patel: I will give way to my hon. Friend first and then I will come to the hon. Lady.

Andy Carter: I think every member of the Committee firmly believes that every Member of Parliament has the right to share their opinions in this House, but the 2019 House of Commons code for Members is very clear: Members must not lobby the Committee, or the Commissioner in a manner calculated to influence their consideration of issues related to conduct. The current Members' code of conduct does not mention that the Privileges Committee should be included in that. This report suggests that that should be amended so that Members serving on the Privileges Committee are also afforded those rights. I do not want any Member of Parliament to be prevented from saying what they believe once a report is published, but not during the process of producing a report.

Priti Patel: With respect, I have heard what my hon. Friend has had to say, but if he had listened to what I have had to say, he would know that I am worried that this will set a dangerous precedent.

Dame Angela Eagle: I was going to make a very similar point to the one that the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) has just made. Does the right hon. Member agree that this is not about criticising a report once it is published? It is about not trying to nobble it while it is going on.

Priti Patel: With all respect to the hon. Lady, in her remarks today, she used a range of phrases, which she scatter-gunned around the Chamber, in an accusatory way about what individuals have said or may not have said. She cannot apply that to all of us, so I think she should have been careful in some of the phrases that she used.

If I may, I will comment further about my concerns with the process. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Lia Nici) touched on an important point, about which Mr Speaker is also very clear—he is a strong proponent of the concept that important matters should come to the House first, before they are published in the media. As she pointed out regarding the publication of Committee reports, paragraphs 15.10 and 38.56 of “Erskine May” refer to the premature publication and disclosure of Committee proceedings as being in contempt. Cakeism is a phrase that has already been used this afternoon by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg). We cannot have it both ways.

I recognise the Committee's frustrations that the report was leaked, and I know that comments have been made when the Government did not come to the House before announcing things in the media. However, we have to be concerned that details contained in the special report were published by a particular newspaper at 7.20 pm on Wednesday 28 June, some 13 hours and 40 minutes before the special report was published, and before people named in its annex were informed.

Frankly, given how this has all been conducted—individuals were not contacted in advance and there was no right of reply—is the House not concerned that that newspaper, *The Guardian*, knew of the report's contents before the rest of us did? Surely that should be a matter for investigation as well. If the Committee is so concerned with cases of contempt of the House, investigating how the report or its contents were leaked to *The Guardian* before it was published is something else that should feature in due process.

Would any members of the Committee or its Chair like to explain why that newspaper knew in advance, before the rest of us? What action is going to be taken? We have already heard talk about restoring parliamentary democracy and integrity to Parliament. Again, that would give confidence to Members that due process was being followed, but it would also give confidence to the public, who also expect standards across the board to be upheld.

We have a report from the Committee that names Members and peers, but it did not inform us in advance. We have discussed already the House's rules on behaviour and courtesies. I personally think that Members should be given notice; that is respectful. During my time serving on the Front Bench, or on the Back Benches, as I am now, I hope that I have never offended a Member of this House by being so discourteous as to name them without informing them in advance. That is a good standard that we should all live up to.

Not only has there been a lack of courtesy shown to Members named in the report, but the absence of due process concerns me a lot. Until this was published, I and colleagues had no idea that we were being investigated, or that there were references to us as individuals in the annex in relation to the inquiry into Mr Johnson.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Priti Patel: I did not see the Member appear at the start, but I will give way.

Mr Perkins: I have been here for all of the right hon. Lady's speech and, over the 14 minutes of it, I have been desperately hoping she was going to get to the point she really wants to raise. She does not disagree that she said the things that are in the report, but she thinks it is discourteous that she was not told in advance. She thinks other people may have said things that were missed out of the report. What is actually the main point of what, over the last 14 minutes, she has been saying?

Priti Patel: If the hon. Gentleman had the courtesy of listening, the point is actually due process. As he would know, if he had listened to my opening remarks, I also said that I was sure not everyone here would agree with what I was about to say, but affording the courtesy

of debate in this House was exactly why we were here. If he does not want to hear what I am saying, he might actually want to leave the Chamber, rather than carrying on in this way. It is important in the debate to have a right of reply. Again, I appreciate that he and other Members will disagree with this, but I think it is right that the basics should be put on the public record. The country is watching. Well, some of the country is watching, if they are not watching Wimbledon right now, but this is an insight into how we engage in our business, and what right of reply Members do or do not have. Quite frankly, this will affect all Members; it is not just about supporting those today, because there will be others in the future and that is important.

Some of the language that has been used is important as well. I personally think that it simply cannot be right or fair for a Committee to make claims or assertions without giving notice in advance, or the chance to at least respond to allegations. I am going to go as far as to say, if I may, that I found some of this deeply secretive and I just do not think that Select Committees operate in this way; they really do not. I have had the great privilege of serving on a number of Select Committees and I think the way in which we conduct ourselves is very important.

I notice that the Leader of the House said that this is deeply unusual. It is all deeply unusual, and not just because of a lack of process. My office, supported by the House of Commons Library, undertook some research to see if there was any precedent for MPs being named, and effectively or potentially sanctioned or censured in a report by a Committee. *[Interruption.]* No, I am giving an example. I hear what the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) says, but I am just giving an example—colleagues might learn something from this, too. Even the Library said that it could not think of any Committee on Standards, Privileges Committee, or former Committees on Standards recommending anything of this nature without the opportunity for those named to make their case. Today is a chance at least to give that a bit of an airing and to make the case as well.

I will conclude my remarks. Again, in the light of what I have said thus far, there are so many issues here that I think will have wide implications for Parliament, if I may say so, and for Members of Parliament. I have touched on process. The evidence issue—the lack of evidence that the Committee has presented—has been touched on as well. Paragraph 14 makes serious allegations that I and other Members were part of a co-ordinated campaign of interfering with the work of the Privileges Committee, so one would expect those claims to be backed up with some serious volumes of evidence, but they are not. While the Committee may obviously disagree with Members, the fact that people can now freely express views about the inquiry is obviously part of living in a healthy democracy, with free speech and freedom of expression. However, the Committee has not explained in this report how the expression of an opinion or a view that some people shared could in itself undermine the work of the Committee or could be co-ordinated.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), a member of the Committee, touched on my remarks quoted in the annex. Those remarks came from an interview on Budget day that covered a range of issues: the economy, taxation, the Budget, migration—lively issues that I think all Members in the

[Priti Patel]

House like to discuss. We also discussed Mr Johnson, and the activities of a Mrs Sue Gray and the Leader of the Opposition. It is not at all clear from the Committee's report why it believes that a reference, in a lengthy interview covering multiple issues, to questions over transparency and accountability constitutes interference in its work, could be disturbing, or could be part of a co-ordinated campaign. Those are areas on which we should get clarity.

So far, the suggestions have been one-way; we have been told that we should go to the Committee if there are issues, but the Committee could have raised any issues with us. The Committee could have done that if it had any concern about comments I made. I am not someone who hides behind the sofa in Parliament; many colleagues will recognise that. I would welcome lively engagement, as I am sure other Members referenced in the annex would have done. I certainly would have welcomed the Committee contacting and engaging with me in good time. That is quite important. Frankly, I think the public will still reach their own conclusions about all this.

I appreciate that I have detained the House for a lengthy period—I thank hon. Members for listening—but given the tone of the accusations made, the contents of the annex, and the lack of a prior opportunity to respond, it is important that we have this discussion and that colleagues listen. I hope that the Committee will reflect on comments made about process. I really do not think that there is evidence to substantiate the claims that have been made and, if the motion is agreed to, there will be the ongoing matter for the House of what that means for MPs.

I might be boring for Britain right now, but I believe in transparency, accountability and due process, particularly having sat on the Front Bench; today we have also heard about holding Ministers to account. I believe in all that. Woe betide the Minister who misleads Parliament. Sometimes there is not enough scrutiny of the details of what Ministers say, and not enough challenges. That is why it is important that we have this debate about accountability, transparency, due process, and sometimes correcting the record. I believe, as do other hon. and right hon. Members, in transparency, freedom of speech and Members facing fair and due process when allegations are made about their actions. That should be dealt with properly. I urge Members to think about the impact that the report will have on our parliamentary democracy and our freedoms. I fundamentally believe that, without freedom of speech, there can be no democracy; it is something that we have to preserve, stand up for and respect in this House.

5.43 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The initial Privileges Committee investigation into the former Prime Minister, the then Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, has set a clear and fundamental precedent. If a Prime Minister deliberately misleads this House and, by extension, the public, there will be consequences. I put on record my thanks to the hon. and right hon. Members who served on the Privileges Committee. Considering the weighty matter of whether a former Prime Minister misled the House was clearly a significant task, and it is regrettable that, as the report outlines, the

actions of some hon. and right hon. Members made the task harder for Members serving on the Committee. As we have heard, that was not without personal consequences for those Members.

As the Leader of the House pointed out in her opening remarks, there are ways and means of raising issues of privilege. We should remember that the investigation had its genesis in a motion that was passed in this House without Division; not a single Member named in the report voted against the motion. Not only is the Committee cross party, but it has a Conservative majority. It is worth pointing out that there is no Liberal Democrat on the Committee, but I accept as an individual MP that the current process involves a cross-party group of MPs, and they are trusted by this House to investigate with impartiality and to make their findings available for consideration by the House. Those recommendations are then to be approved or rejected by this House. Had Boris Johnson been suspended from Parliament for more than 10 days and chosen to remain an MP, it would have been up to the people of Uxbridge to determine whether they wanted to re-elect him as their MP. Members from all parts of the House must make it clear that we will not tolerate attempts to undermine or attack the vitally important work of this Committee.

We were promised integrity, accountability and professionalism at all levels of government, and I have to note, like the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), the current Prime Minister's steadfast refusal to declare where he stands on this issue, let alone to engage with the substantive content of this report and the previous one. That is an abdication of his duty not only as Prime Minister but as an individual MP. It is unfortunate.

The hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) said she was pleased that the report was not amended, but there is a sign of weakness from the Government, where they have said "no, thank you" to the offer in the Privileges Committee's report. It stated:

"It will be for the House to consider what further action, if any, to take in respect of Members of the House referred to in this special report."

I would go as far as to suggest that had the Government taken the opportunity to make some process clear following today's report, they might have seen off some of the accusations of lack of due process that we have heard today from Members named in the report and those supporting them. Today should have served as an opportunity to set another precedent and to make it clear that there are consequences for those who seek to obstruct the important work of a cross-party, independent Committee. It is a shame that the Government have not done so. That is why I tabled my amendment.

I accept that my amendment has not been selected, but the clear route forward would have been for the Committee to consider whether contempt had been committed and to return a verdict and, if necessary, a sanction. As the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) said, that could have given her an opportunity to make her case in relation to what has been reported. The same process was used for the Committee's report into the former Prime Minister, Mr Johnson. I also point out that today's debate does not shut the window on that opportunity. The Government could bring forward such a motion if they wished at any future point; they could bring it forward tomorrow, and I hope they do so.

This place is still suffering from the Owen Paterson decision, because that was the point where the convention of this House to accept Privileges Committee and Standards Committee reports on the nod was broken by the Government. Now is the time for a reset.

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

5.47 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I rise to speak in my capacity as Chair of the Procedure Committee. I have to start by apologising to my Clerk, who wrote a detailed technical note about the procedures involved in this motion. All the technical points that my Clerk made have been made already, so I will not detain the House with them, but I thank her for the work she did.

Instead, I will make some general points about what we do in this place and how I hope we might be able to start behaving in a slightly different way. I will start by referring to the point about Committees. We cannot cover every issue on the Floor of this House, and that is why we depute Members to serve on Committees, whether Select Committees, House Committees such as the Procedure Committee, or Bill Committees. We ask those Members to spend their time—they do take up significant amounts of their time—scrutinising legislation and looking at issues that have been raised with them.

The members of the Standards and Privileges Committees have the most difficult jobs of effectively having to police the behaviour of their own colleagues. They have personal reasons often for not wishing to be part of that, but they do it because this House has asked them to do it. We should always remember that point: they are serving because the House has asked them to serve; they are not serving through choice, and they are doing a difficult job. I will come on to the point that the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) made about policing ourselves, because there is a real danger if we do not take this matter seriously.

When it comes to Select Committees that report, there is absolutely nothing to stop any Member from criticising a report once it has been published. In fact, Governments usually criticise such reports substantially in their responses. Select Committees expect their reports to be scrutinised and examined, and they expect criticism of them—that is the very nature of our parliamentary debate and democracy. Nobody is saying that, once a report has been published, Members cannot criticise it. The important point is that there are ways in which we can interact with Committees while they are doing their work. Those are set out clearly in the report.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The substantive part of the motion, paragraph (b)—that the Committee should have the same protection as the Standards Committee—is uncontroversial. What has become clear is that the way in which Members feel they have been impugned without a say, which makes paragraph (a) of the motion controversial. It might be best if the Leader of the House were to withdraw the motion and re-table it with just paragraph (b). We might then avoid the argument and Division that we are going to have.

Karen Bradley: I served with my right hon. Friend in the Whips Office and have enormous respect for him. The Committee proposed the motion. We asked the

Committee to do its work, and it proposed the motion. There is nothing unparliamentary about what it has put forward and there is nothing that is not procedurally accurate in what it has done. I for one will back my colleagues, because I would ask them to back me on a motion about a report that I had put forward as a Select Committee Chair, and I would hope that they would do so.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): As someone who has the privilege of serving on my right hon. Friend's Procedure Committee, may I ask her whether she can recall a single occasion when the Procedure Committee has produced a report naming individuals without giving those individuals the opportunity first to present evidence? Is it not the problem that we have a report based not on evidence but on stuff that has been tweeted? As somebody who does not do tweets, I am ever more grateful that I do not.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is a very assiduous member of the Procedure Committee. He is right that we would report evidence for an inquiry only if it had been given to us by a Member in good faith and they knew it was going to be reported, but in this case we are not talking about that; we are talking about evidence produced in the report that is in the public domain. It has not been gathered in any other way. Of course, the motion is not the report; it is about giving the members of the Privileges Committee the same protections as members of the Standards Committee. It is difficult to argue against that.

Mark Jenkinson *rose*—

Karen Bradley: I will give way one further time and then continue to make my points.

Mark Jenkinson: I agree with the substantive point about the Privileges Committee being given the same protection as the Standards Committee, but you referred to evidence in the report, and I have been quite clear that that “evidence” was taken out of context in some cases—not least mine.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend will have the opportunity to make that point during the debate. I would also pick him up on having made a slight technical error in what he said. He said “you”, which refers to Madam Deputy Speaker. I suggest that when we make an inadvertent technical error around our procedures, the most appropriate thing to do at that stage is to apologise and move on. That is the point here. Things have been said by some in the public domain that could have constituted criticism and an attempt to influence the Committee, and that is not allowed in our procedures.

There are ways in which Committees can be approached. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)—my next-door neighbour—did exactly that on 22 July last year, when he tabled an early-day motion, signed by four other Members, in which he criticised the Committee and what it was doing. That was perfectly parliamentary. He was able to do that and did nothing wrong in tabling that early-day motion.

We cannot start on the slope of allowing Members to try to influence all sorts of Committees, be that the Procedure Committee, the Work and Pensions Committee, the Committee on Standards in Public Life or whatever.

[Karen Bradley]

We have our procedures in place to enable Members to interact with Committees. They can make representations to Committees, they can vote on the membership of Committees, and they can vote on the motions and the terms of reference. That is all available, and then, when the report is published, they can say whatever they wish about that, because it is in the public domain. That is the technical difference.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) *rose*—

Karen Bradley: I will allow one further intervention. I did say only one earlier, but I will allow my hon. Friend.

Dr Johnson: My right hon. Friend, with her expertise on the Procedure Committee, clearly has much more experience in procedures than I do. Could she help me? The Privileges Committee has produced interim information on how it was to proceed with the difficult task it had been given. There will be Members who wish to agree with that process and those who wish perhaps to agree with and criticise the process. She suggested that a Member could table an early-day motion. Are there other ways in which that can be done in Parliament? Most specifically, is she suggesting that the Committee cannot be criticised outside Parliament on Twitter and on social media?

Karen Bradley: What I am saying is that, as right hon. and hon. Members we have a duty to protect and work with our friends who are doing this difficult work. There are many ways in which Members can interact with a Committee as it carries out such work: they can make representations; they can probably raise points of order on the Floor of the House; they can table early-day motions and all manner of other motions—and they are parliamentary ways. They are not through the general media or Twitter or other ways.

Dr Johnson *rose*—

Karen Bradley: I will give way a final time.

Dr Johnson: Just to clarify, is my right hon. Friend saying that if asked in general by perhaps a journalist for one's opinion on such things, one should not give an opinion because one should leave it to the parliamentary process?

Karen Bradley: Yes, absolutely—that is exactly the point. The Standards Committee and the Privileges Committee in particular have specific provisions in “Erskine May”, and the members of those Committees cannot answer back—they have no right to do so—so until a Committee has reported, it is not parliamentary to make such comments. I gently say that if this happened inadvertently because Members did not know—this is a very technical point—I am sure that an apology, saying just that there was no intention to influence the Committee, would be appreciated.

I turn to my final point, which, actually, the hon. Member for Wallasey started to make, which is about policing ourselves. I would very much like us to get back to having motions on House business going through on the nod. The moment we started to whip House business put us on a very slippery slope, because the House will

make decisions and the House needs to support Members. I hope that we can go back to those things going through on the nod, with us trusting our colleagues to police us.

We did not do things well when it came to our expenses. We policed our own expenses, and look at what happened as a result of that. I strongly suggest that nobody in the House wants us to get to a position where an outside body, third parties and non-Members start to police us. If we want to continue policing ourselves, we need to have faith in the system we have, and we need to support those right hon. and hon. Members who are doing their very best to do their job.

5.57 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Privileges Committee has had an important duty to fulfil. I want to put on the record my thanks to it for the work it has done, and in particular to its Chair, who has been a lightning rod for criticism. I also want to mention the Conservative members of the Committee who, in addition to the public questioning of their credentials, have had to withstand some internal party pressure, which we have read about in the report. I understand how difficult it is to go against a colleague in any situation, never mind a former leader. It is to their credit that they have stood firm against that pressure. Their wider duty to the democratic process has prevailed. We should all bear in mind that whichever party is in power, if there are no consequences for misleading Parliament, we might as well all pack up and go home.

The motion, as we know, is not about that former Member; it is about undermining the Committee and its work. Given the seriousness of the allegations, which appear to be beyond doubt—they are a matter of public record—this really ought to be a watershed moment about how we conduct ourselves not just inside the Chamber but outside it as well. We are not commentators or bystanders in the political process; we are part of the glue that holds our democracy together, and when we pick away at the threads that tie our system together, we need to be careful that we do not unravel the whole thing.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that Members of Parliament directly elected by our constituents have fewer rights to comment on social media and outside this House than ordinary members of the public and the press.

Justin Madders: That is not at all what I am saying. It is clear that people have had plenty to say on this report today. We do not comment on reports of other Committees of the House until they are finalised, which is absolutely correct and proper. There are very good reasons, which we have heard today, why we should continue to do that.

The fact that we are still having this debate shows that Conservative Members do not understand why we have to show some restraint when dealing with sensitive internal matters. There is no shortage of people out there who will call us out for being motivated solely by party politics. By our very nature we are political animals, but on occasions we need to move beyond that, remember the wider public interest and show that standards in public life matter. When it comes to our duties to our constituents and to the country, we should be the leaders; we should not be following others.

Let us imagine that if every time a constituent received a parking fine or had to go to court for some reason, they decided to challenge the integrity of the court or the body issuing that fine. Nothing would ever be decided, would it? The reason that does not happen in a mature democracy is that nothing would ever work. What kind of message would we send as parliamentarians if we do not trust a body that was set up by Parliament itself to deal with such an important matter? We would give the green light to chaos.

It is not that those who have questioned the Committee's integrity have not availed themselves of the opportunity to do something about it. We have heard plenty of times already that there was plenty of opportunity to object to its competence. Members did not do that because, deep down, they know that anyone placed on that Committee deserves the trust and the confidence of the rest of this place to do their job. Given the Conservative majority on the panel, it would have been absurd for people to have objected to its composition anyway. That is what makes the claims that it was a kangaroo court look even more desperate and damaging.

We need confidence in our colleagues that they will do their duty beyond the day-to-day hustle and bustle of party politics, because that is how politics will survive in this country. We in this place are custodians of democracy. How we act, what we say and what is deemed acceptable all matter, because they become the norm for the generations to follow. If we are not careful, the standards and behaviours that a healthy Parliament should have will be lost and, before we know it, we will be in a dark place indeed.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Given the hon. Member's point about how we in this House are custodians, does he agree that a report of this nature should at least provide some evidence when it makes a statement such as "the most disturbing examples of the co-ordinated campaign"?

As far as I can see, there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever to support that statement. If you are custodians of the House—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows, as happened previously with the hon. Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson), that he must not address other Members directly. "You" means me—okay?

Justin Madders: There is evidence—it is in the annexes. It is pretty clear that there was a co-ordinated campaign from a Conservative organisation to lobby Committee members. If people are insisting that what is there in black and white is not what happened, we are in a very strange place indeed. We will not survive if that is how we carry on.

Our democracy is fragile and needs to be protected. It cannot be taken for granted. It has to be cherished, supported and nurtured. We are its current guardians. Sometimes, we have to accept that we have said things that we should not have said, and we have to apologise and move on. We have to accept that saying the right thing is not always easy. Sometimes, "sorry" is the hardest word to say. Sometimes, we have to accept that someone on our own side may not have met the standards that we would expect everyone to adhere to. No one should be bigger than democracy—no individual, no Government.

This place should be a force for good. It should be here to tackle injustices in all their forms. When there is an assault on the rules that govern this place—as we have seen in this report—to suit a short-term political agenda, we will all pay a much harsher price in the long term. This all about leadership. We are all required to be leaders. Our parliamentary system has relied on people behaving with honour and according to respected conventions. When a strand of political thinking does not respect the rules and does not think that constitutional road blocks are anything other than something to be driven around, the weaknesses in our current system become all too apparent. Over time, democracy will be eroded until we end up in a place where no authority is respected, no rules matter and nobody believes anything we say any more.

It will not have escaped Members' notice that deepfake videos are becoming more commonplace. We face a huge challenge as a Parliament and a country to maintain trust in the face of that and the cesspit of social media. We need to put in the hard yards to ensure that people can believe the words that come out of our mouths—that they are ours, and true to our values and principles—and that honour still matters in this place. Attacking the institutions that uphold the veracity of what is said in here is causing an additional problem that we could do without. By God, we have enough challenges as a country without making it harder for ourselves by attacking each other over what we believe is a question of integrity.

We can do better. We can disagree without being disagreeable. Parliament should be the beacon of fair play, and an example for others both in this country and abroad of how democracy can work, how it can be a good thing and how it can change lives for the better. Despite our differences, we are not always so bound up in our own tribal disputes that we cannot agree what the truth is and, most importantly, that the truth always matters.

6.6 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a privilege to speak in this debate. I will try not to take too long or to repeat things that have already been said.

It is a great shame that the debate on the Privileges Committee's fifth report, on Boris Johnson, became largely a debate about the integrity and standing of the Committee itself, rather than just the behaviour of Boris Johnson, which was the subject of the report. I can understand why many Members saw it as such, but it is important to establish in this debate that it is possible and legitimate to be in disagreement with some of the Committee's conclusions, yet still respect and uphold the Committee's authority and integrity. I say that because that is exactly the position I took in relation to that report. It must be legitimate to do that if the position is—as it is—that the Committee makes recommendations to the whole House, and the whole House then decides whether to accept them.

The report that we are debating today is entirely about the Privileges Committee's authority and integrity, and about how that should be upheld. Just as criticism of the Committee's conclusions can be perfectly legitimate, and just as it is not right to say that any criticism of it is

[Sir Jeremy Wright]

an attack on its authority, so it is not right to say that all attacks on the Committee must be allowable as exercises of free speech. We recognise, do we not, that free speech is sometimes properly restricted in the interests of broader freedoms? That is exactly what we are considering here.

The Committee's special report makes the strong point that there are legitimate opportunities for Members to oppose a referral of a matter to the Committee in the first place—as has been observed, in the case of Boris Johnson nobody did, not even Boris Johnson. The Committee is also right to say that criticism of its conclusions is perfectly valid, as is a decision not to support those conclusions. What is not valid is to attack or to seek to influence or undermine a Committee that this House has charged with an inquiry while that inquiry is ongoing.

Karen Bradley: My right hon. and learned Friend allows me to make a point that I have just considered as we have been debating. If this was a criminal trial, it would be sub judice and Members of Parliament would not be allowed to comment on it. Perhaps we should think of the Committee as something analogous to that—a quasi-judicial process in which Members can complete their work without influence from other Members, while proper processes are still available for Members to make representations.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Yes, I understand entirely the point my right hon. Friend makes. But there are, of course, significant differences between the work done by the Committee and the work of a court. It comes back to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), which I enjoyed too much to interrupt. It seemed to me that the point he was making about Lord Hoffmann also bears some scrutiny in this respect. Courts are decision-making bodies. The Privileges Committee is not a decision-making body. The House of Commons as a whole is the decision-making body. There is therefore a difference between the way the Privileges Committee operates and the way in which a court operates. Where I do agree with my right hon. Friend is that it is important to the integrity of the Committee's investigation that Members of this House, having delegating authority to that Committee to do the work, do not seek to derail it while it happens. That does not mean that they are not entitled to criticise any conclusions that the Committee may reach, and nor is it inappropriate, as I have done myself, for a Member not to agree with the conclusions the Committee has reached.

Lia Nici: My right hon. and learned Friend is making a very interesting point. Does he not therefore think that there is some form of contempt when persons who had sight of the report and decided, before the report came to this House and was published, to leak it to a *Guardian* reporter?

Sir Jeremy Wright: I certainly do not think that material of that kind should be leaked to newspapers before it is discussed in this House. I have no knowledge of the facts of who did what, but I agree with my hon. Friend that there should be no leaking of that kind.

We can only, in the context of this debate, discuss the motion before us. If for nothing other than novelty's sake, perhaps I should speak a little bit about the motion. The Committee makes a good argument that, given there is little material difference, either in process or in the potential consequences for a Member being investigated, between privilege cases on one hand and standards cases on the other, the protection that this House gives to the Privileges Committee and the Standards Committee in the exercise of their duties should be the same. That is a good point, but I think it is also worth noting that the motion does not quite achieve that equality. For standards matters, as is quoted in the special report, the code of conduct states that there must be no lobbying of members of the Committee. There is no mention in the code of conduct in that regard of intimidation, or of impugning the integrity of the Committee, as there is in this motion.

Two questions surely arise. First, should those additional considerations of intimidation and impugning the integrity of the Committee be included? Secondly, if so, should they not be included in relation to standards matters also? On the first, it should not really be necessary to say that intimidation is unacceptable, but it surely cannot be wrong to say it, so I completely support its inclusion in the motion.

As for impugning the integrity of the Committee, as I mentioned in an intervention on the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), it must be a possibility that the integrity of a future Committee—not, of course, this Committee or any previous Committee—could be impugned. The Committee cannot be invulnerable to challenge and criticism, if that criticism is merited. But were that to be the case, as Members of this House we have the right to raise our concerns in debates about the Committee's recommendations and about any allegations about another Member's integrity. Members of the Privileges Committee, or not, may well raise themselves the sorts of standards and privileges matters that should be the subject of separate investigations. With that clarity that the impugning of the Committee's integrity, if any, is not appropriate while an inquiry is under way, again that seems to me a sensible inclusion.

On the second question, the position should surely be equivalent for standards and privileges. Although I fully subscribe to the view, expressed by many, that we really need to move on from this, I am afraid that on another day we will probably at least have to return to the question of whether we need to improve the language on the protections we offer to the Standards Committee, so that it can match this motion, which I hope the House will pass this evening. As others have said, I hope it will pass without a vote, but if it does not, I shall vote in favour of it.

6.14 pm

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to finally put forward my case.

Magna Carta was issued in June 1215, and was the first document to limit power and formalise the concept that no authority, not even the King, was above the law. It sought to limit the abuses of royal prerogative and birthed an idea, which through the long arc of human history, led to the principle and fact of equality under the law. Further, it led to the long-standing right that every Member of this House would be able to speak

without fear or favour. My great ancestor William Marshal, the Earl of Pembroke, who served five monarchs and saved us from the French in the battle of Lincoln, was present at the signing of the great charter and then reissued it in its own name. His statue clutching the great Magna Carta is in the House of Lords looking down on the throne and the Chamber, and, I would imagine, keeping an eye on the monarch and proceedings.

I say that because from this House and from this nation has flowed an example of parliamentary authority through the people; democratic law making, and just and reasonable power. My deep concern is that the Committee may not have followed the example of just or reasonable power, and that it has, I believe, in my opinion, taken three roles as judge, jury and executioner. In its own way, the Committee's approach has prompted just and reasonable questions. Why is the Committee trying to limit the speech of Members of this House? Why were we, the named MPs, not given the opportunity to defend ourselves before the publication of the report? I believe that the answers to those questions point to the fact that the Committee overstepped the remit given to it by this place to the detriment of democracy and the dialogue that flows from it.

Furthermore, we must ask why, if this House is now policing the speech of hon. Members, has the House not taken action previously? Why was no action taken when the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said, "Why aren't we lynching the bitch?" in reference to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey)? The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), someone who aspires to be the Deputy Prime Minister of our great country and is a Privy Counsellor, said in public that Conservatives were scum and no action was taken by the House. Then compare that to my tweet, in which I said in reference to the former Member for Uxbridge:

"I hope to see him fully exonerated and to put an end to this kangaroo court."

Allan Dorans: Does the hon. Lady agree, on reflection, that to make such a statement, posted on Twitter on 21 March—

"I hope to see him fully exonerated and to put an end to this kangaroo court."—

during a formal live investigation, ordered unanimously by this House, was at least disrespectful to the members of the Privileges Committee and potentially a contempt of this House, on whose behalf the inquiry was being conducted?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before the hon. Lady answers, I presume she did notify—

Dame Andrea Jenkyns *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: I thank the hon. Member for his prepared question. I believe in freedom of speech. My tweet clearly shows the overreach of the Committee. This is an argument for the right to free speech held not just by Members of this House, but as an ancient right of every citizen of this democracy. The actions of the Committee could mark a dangerous precedent, a slippery slope. Are we, as MPs, to be sanctioned for

voicing an opinion on the work of Members' Committees or the outcomes of this place? If so, colleagues may want to consider how they vote today and what precedent they set, because they may be next. Surely an MP's job is not only to represent their constituents but to speak truth to power, however uncomfortable that truth may be.

So, Members across the House, let us look at some facts, shall we? My crime is that I wrote a tweet in March expressing an opinion. I have not personally criticised or even spoken with any member of the Committee, or incited any action to be taken against them. I have merely relied on my rights as a Member of this House, which may go against the popular opinion held in this place. Democracy is dialogue, made richer by a range of opinions, views and values.

Six colleagues and I are named in the second report. As has been mentioned, that was not authorised by Parliament. No evidence was heard from us. The Committee makes factual errors. The Conservative Democratic Organisation does not own the *Conservative Post*; they are two entirely separate organisations. The Committee also lambasts three Members of the House of Lords and the press, the *Conservative Post*, demonstrating constitutional overreach. It grossly over-interprets what "intimidate" means. How can one tweet, in which I do not refer to any member of the Committee personally, be considered intimidation?

The Committee denounces my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) for merely saying that serious questions must be asked. It has selectively targeted Members, ignoring others. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) referred on the BBC to the Committee as a kangaroo court. Now, I have nothing against Mr Seely. He is a very good MP and I have lots of respect for him, but—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady knows that she cannot refer to Members by name; she needs to refer to them by constituency.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have nothing against him—he is a very good MP—but why has he not been included in the report?

The Committee, in my opinion, is attempting to police language and criticism. It is claiming that what has been said about it, but not to it, on TV and Twitter is an attempt to intimidate it directly. Does the Committee have an issue with the right of reply? We never got a right of reply before the report was published. Interfering with the freedom of any Member of Parliament to comment on the Committee's work sets a dangerous and chilling precedent, not only for freedom of speech but for any work that Committees of this House do in future. MPs will not dare criticise—and if that stands, what a sad place our great House of Commons will have become. Once a great beacon of democracy and freedom, it risks being tainted by silencing those who merely speak up.

Our freedom of speech-loving Prime Minister recently appointed the first ever free speech tsar. Well, maybe he should include the House of Commons in his remit. The Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), said during her recent leadership bid:

"Our democracy thrives on freedom of speech".

[*Dame Andrea Jenkyns*]

I completely agree. On his website, the Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), wrote:

“The Government and the opposition are determined to lead the world in making sure that being online in the UK is a safe place to be...somewhere that freedom of speech can thrive”.

I agree 100%, Chief.

The hon. Member for Rhondda, Sir Chris Bryant, has said—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady must stop calling people by their name—that is twice now that I have had to say that. Can she assure me that she notified the Chief Whip and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) that she was going to mention them?

Dame Andrea Jenkyns indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Okay.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: After the BBC cancelled an interview with the hon. Member, he wrote that “some oligarchs’ lawyers are cracking down on free speech.”

The former leader of the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), commented about Gary Lineker:

“I’m sure we can count on the Free Speech Union to stand up against this hysterical act of cancellation...”.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Dame Andrea Jenkyns: I am sorry; I am nearly at the end.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) stated:

“Those on the frontline of environmental destruction are freedom fighters”.

Yet seven MPs who express an opinion are hauled into the Chamber to defend themselves in this debate.

If the House truly believes in free speech for all, it should vote down this motion and send a message that this House will not tolerate the policing of speech for Members of this House. By the way, out of common courtesy, I would like to reiterate that I contacted the hon. Members I have mentioned in my speech to say that I would be doing so—a privilege that the seven of us were not afforded by the Privileges Committee, as we had no prior notice that we were to be mentioned in its report.

I conclude by quoting from our greatest Prime Minister ever, Sir Winston Churchill:

“Everyone is in favour of free speech. Hardly a day passes without its being extolled, but some people’s idea of it is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone says anything back, that is an outrage.”—[*Official Report*, 13 October 1943; Vol. 392, c. 923.]

Sir Winston was right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. If hon. Members are going to refer to somebody who is not in the debate, it is probably a good idea for them to say, “and by the way, I have notified them,” so that I do not have to keep interrupting.

Again, may I remind hon. Members that they cannot refer to other Members by name? But I can, so I call Sir Michael Fabricant.

6.24 pm

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): One thing on which I think we can all agree is that we do not envy those people who had to serve on the Privileges Committee. A lot of us on both sides of the House received emails some time ago from 38 Degrees, but apparently that was nothing compared with the number of emails that particularly my Conservative colleagues on the Committee received: a colleague who is no longer in his place told me that he received something like 600 emails. That really is completely unacceptable.

It is wrong to try to interfere with the Privileges Committee, just as it is wrong to interfere with the Standards Committee or indeed with any other Committee of the House, whether that be the Transport Committee, the Committee of Selection—the best Committee of all—or the Administration Committee. That in itself is a breach of privilege, but as colleagues have said, it is also a breach of privilege not to allow Members of Parliament to speak out.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Michael Fabricant: In a moment. Part of the argument presented for the motion is that there was some sort of collusion going on. I know what drove me to make my comments, which I shall read out in full, as the Chairman of the Committee, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), did not. I will shortly explain what provoked me to make them. The point is that many of the comments that people made were spontaneous and driven by events. I will explain why, because I see doubt on the face of the right hon. and learned Lady, but let me first give way to the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley: In the form letter, of which 600 copies were sent to our colleagues on the Privileges Committee—for those who are following the debate, it is on page 11 of the report—colleagues were implored to “protect your own integrity by rejecting this committee”.

The letter ended with a call for them to

“protect your integrity by resigning from this committee”.

I agree with my hon. Friend that those words were unacceptable. They should not have been said while the Committee was holding hearings. Other things, perhaps, should not have been said either.

Michael Fabricant: I certainly agree that it is completely unacceptable to say:

“We urge you to take action and protect your integrity by resigning from this committee immediately.”

Incidentally, if hon. Members received 600 emails just like that, with hardly any change in the wording, I hope that those emails ended up where many of the identical emails we get end up, which is in the bin. That is what they deserve.

But this Committee was particularly difficult. I think it is fair to say that there is nobody in this land who does not have a view, one way or another, about Boris Johnson; I think possibly Margaret Thatcher is the only other

person to have fallen into that category. It is perfectly human. Whether someone is a judge in the Court of Appeal or the Supreme Court, or whether they sit in a quasi-judicial role, they are bound to have views. I totally accept that members of the Committee will try hard, often with success, to put those views in the background while trying to make a fair and decent judgment.

So why did I say what I said? I will read it out in full:

“Serious questions will need to be asked about the manner in which the investigation was conducted”—

I was talking about procedure.

“These were no jurists as was apparent by the tone of the examination. The question of calibre, malice and prejudice will need to be answered now or by historians.”

I think people will ask these questions, and they may well exonerate the Committee. They may well say that there was no malice or prejudice and that the calibre was excellent, but I think it is fair to pose the questions.

The next question one might ask is why I tweeted those questions at that time. Well, I attended the hearing at which Boris Johnson gave his evidence, and I was there for the whole period. When he gave his evidence, the Committee had a quasi-judicial role. He had to raise his right hand and swear an oath, and he did. Some of the Committee’s members—I will not single out any individuals because some of them are very close friends of mine—behaved with absolute dignity and professionalism, but one turned his back on Boris Johnson as he gave evidence, another gasped in frustration and two looked heavenwards, as if to accuse him of being a liar. If it were a court of law, and we have heard that it was not, the judge would have called the jury to order.

Of course it was not a court of law, but when a witness comes along and swears the oath and a group of individuals give judgment, I would call it a court of law. I simply make the point that justice must not only be done but be seen to be done. Certainly on the day the evidence was given, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham pulled one of her faces, as she has just now. It is not in order to do that when taking evidence in a quasi-judicial role.

I simply suggest that members of a Committee sitting in a quasi-judicial role, whether it be the Privileges Committee, the Standards Committee or a hybrid Bill Committee, such as the High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill Committee, are not all professional lawyers. Many of them are not. There is a very strong argument that they should be trained in how to take evidence when sitting in a quasi-judicial role, not just so that it is fair—it could be argued that it was not fair—but because, as I said earlier, justice needs to be seen to be done.

Most journalists who were present, as I was, did not feel on that day that justice was seen to be done. The Committee may well have come to the right conclusions. I did not vote against the Committee’s original conclusions—I personally thought the sentence was a little vindictive, but I certainly was not going to vote against the main findings—but it is important that a Committee sitting in a quasi-judicial role is seen to be acting in a fair and proper way.

Was there collusion in the timing of my tweet? No, there was not. It was provoked by the behaviour of the Committee when it took evidence from Boris Johnson, and I still stand by my comment. I will say that if,

because I sent that tweet during the hearing, it intimidated any member of the Committee in any way, and if they thought I had acted to put pressure on them, I apologise.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Thank you.

Michael Fabricant: I do not think for one moment that I intimidated my hon. Friend, in any way, with my comment, but if I had—I use the subjunctive, not the indicative—of course I apologise because that would have been a breach of privilege, as we should not interfere with the proceedings of any Committee.

Alberto Costa: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. The report, with its annex, highlights a sample of some of the tweets. I note that he tweeted on 31 July 2022:

“Harriet Harman determined to ‘stitch up’ #Boris by changing rules of Privilege Committee kangaroo court.”

Does he now accept that referring to the Privileges Committee as a “kangaroo court” is wrong?

Michael Fabricant: I now regret giving way to my hon. Friend. I do not remember that tweet, but the answer is yes, I do.

My hon. Friend gives me the opportunity to say that the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant)—I say “Rhondda” correctly because I speak Welsh—had the integrity to stand down after the tweets he sent. Of course, it is fair to say that the House of Commons approved the appointment of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham as Chair of the Privileges Committee, but I wonder whether on reflection, given the comments she had made publicly, she might have said, “No, it is not appropriate for me to chair the Committee,” just as the hon. Member for Rhondda had.

I think I have now spoken enough. I believe the Committee attempts to behave with integrity, and I think it does behave with integrity. Whether it behaved without expressing some sort of prejudice beforehand is a moot point. Whether it was able to ignore prejudice is an interesting question, and one that historians may well ask in the future.

6.37 pm

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): I have said nothing on this matter until today, as I did not consider that I had a right to do so because I was a member of the Privileges Committee for only a brief time. I was formally replaced by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), who is now in his place, in September 2022, before the substance of the investigation into Boris Johnson began.

I want to highlight some of the comments that were made during the period in which I was a member of the Committee, and I feel impelled to do so because I consider that the issues go to the heart of how we choose to regulate ourselves as Members of Parliament and of the treatment we are willing to tolerate of those Members who put themselves forward to assist in the proper functioning of this House.

As the report points out, the work of the Privileges Committee is “crucial to our democracy” because the functioning of Parliament and the way we discharge our obligations to those we represent depend on Ministers being truthful in what they say at the Dispatch Box.

[*Laura Farris*]

I was asked to become a member of the Committee in or around April 2022 by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), who was then Deputy Chief Whip. I had expressed no interest in joining the Committee, and I do not say that to be critical—it is just a fact. It is not something I had previously considered or wanted to do. I know the same applies to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who was asked to chair the Committee by her party's Whips after the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) recused himself. The Chair had to be a Labour MP under the Standing Order, and it had to be someone of sufficient seniority, so the Mother of the House was an obvious candidate. She had expressed no previous interest, but she accepted the request. I make it clear that I am mounting no criticism of either Government or Opposition Whips, who play an important role in the smooth operation of Parliament. It was incumbent on them to find Members for this difficult and sensitive task. The Mother of the House's appointment was not just the choice of the Opposition Whips; it was approved by the Whips on our side—I remember the discussion about it. I know that the Mother of the House drew the attention of our Whips to the tweet that she had written, and again this was approved. Ultimately, both our memberships were approved by the whole House, because the motion passed without Division.

To contextualise the appointment of the Mother of the House, I want to say on her behalf that she had already announced her intention to retire from Parliament at the next election. Her parliamentary career has spanned five decades and has been defined, probably more so than that of any other person who has ever sat in this House, by her commitment to the advancement of women's rights. Fourteen weeks before she took up that appointment, her husband of 40 years, Jack, had died. Against that background, I invite Members to consider what is more likely: that she agreed to chair the Committee as a final act of service to this House or that she did so because she was interested in pursuing a personal vendetta against Boris Johnson?

I want to make reference to three tweets written by Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park—he is named in the report and I have given notice to his office that I intend to do so. Two were written while I was a member of the Committee, on 23 July and 7 August 2022, and one is a retweet, referred to in the report, on 9 June 2023. The first two were written at a time when the Committee had done no substantive work; the only thing it had done was make a request for disclosure to No. 10 Downing Street. He wrote:

“The Partygate probe is clearly rigged.

It is a jury comprised of highly partisan, vengeful & vindictive MPs, nearly all of whom are already on the record viciously attacking the person they are judging. It is an obscene abuse of power.”

Another said:

“Anyone who has any experience of MPs knows you cannot trust them to judge their peers except through the lens of their own ambition & prejudices. It's why this system is so open to corruption.”

It is completely unacceptable to allege or insinuate that members of the Privileges Committee are corrupt or that the inquiry was somehow rigged. The report uses the

nomenclature of “contempt”, but with the word “corrupt” one could also argue that it is libellous. It has been repeatedly overlooked that a number of the Conservative members of the Committee, including my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Andy Carter), for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), had already undertaken a disciplinary inquiry into Boris Johnson in July 2021 on a completely separate matter. They had been asked to consider whether his holiday in Mustique had been properly declared; they could have found against him, but in fact they found in his favour. So there was no principled reason for Lord Goldsmith's attack, no empirical basis for contending that the Committee could not have found in Boris Johnson's favour, because on a previous occasion it already had. At all times, it would have been open to Members of this House to vote against the Committee's final recommendations, had they disagreed. I cannot avoid the conclusion that the tweets were designed to pressurise the members of the Committee and undermine their work—I say that as someone who, in the end, did not hear the inquiry into Boris Johnson.

However, I think that the conduct of Lord Goldsmith manifestly fell below the standard acceptable for any Member of the upper House, let alone a Minister of his Majesty's Government. I hope you will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I add that I found the environmental pretext that was advanced to justify his resignation somewhat unconvincing, in circumstances where his nose had clearly been put out of joint after he was asked only hours earlier to apologise.

6.43 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris). Not for the first time, she has spoken with great integrity on an issue and opened my eyes to a slightly different point of view, and I am very grateful to her. May I echo her thanks to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the Chair of the Committee? Let me take her back to 2010, when I joined the House for the first time and she gave the new Members' speech. She spoke of what a great privilege it is to be in this House and of its great standards. I recall those messages even now, 13 years later. I would like to disassociate myself from the comments of people here who would in any way wish to impugn her integrity, in this role or in any other while she has been in this House.

I have made it a rule not to participate in any of the somewhat introspective debates on privileges or standards to date, and I will probably wish that I had maintained that record by the end of these remarks. I am not a lawyer. I have not read, and have no desire to read, “*Erskine May*”. I am just a Member of Parliament and so I have to find my way along as we manage these rules. It is in that context that I hope Members of the House will listen to me.

I was inspired by the opening comments of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. In her well-chosen words, she summarised where the House as a whole—perhaps not everyone—is on this. As the shadow Leader of the House is now back in her place, may I mention that I was a bit in despair about her comments? I feel they opened her up to people having a perception,

which she perhaps did not wish to convey, that there was some partisan benefit from those comments and that this was a party political issue and not in the round a matter for all MPs, regardless of their party. I will mention that again in a minute. I thank all members of the Committee. As has been said, being on it is not an easy appointment.

Michael Fabricant *rose*—

Richard Fuller: No, not yet; I may come back to my hon. Friend.

As a regular MP, for me, and I think for many, the habit or custom is that we accept standards or privileges reports in this House without contention. I feel that because I do not see all the evidence. I was not in there for the discussion, so I have to rely upon the good integrity of our colleagues who were. Therefore, it is rare that I would vote against; I broke a three-line Whip on Owen Paterson and I know that some colleagues in the House today did likewise. I had to swallow a lot of disagreement with the report on our former Prime Minister and vote for the report on Boris Johnson. To take the shadow Leader of the House back to this, it concerns me—it is a suspicion; I do not know this for a fact—that, on the last vote on Boris Johnson, a vote was engineered on the report and there was not a willingness for there to be a debate. May I caution hon. Members? I think that today's sentiment is that we are going to have a good talk about this—we will agree and disagree—but there is not much willingness for us to engineer or to have a vote. We should look poorly upon any Member of this House who seeks to engineer a vote for partisan reasons.

Let me explain the depth of my concern about that. I wish to support all of what the Privileges Committee and the Standards Committee say—it is very important that we do that. However, we have increased the level of sanction available to those Committees, given the changes that were put through this House about eight or nine years ago on voter recall. We are giving those Committees not just the ability to judge our behaviour, but the sanction to remove someone from the House. That is another concern as to why we should not allow these processes to fall into partisan issues.

I am still confused—if I am honest, because I am not a lawyer—about the difference between interfering and opining, and about the definition of “impugning the integrity”. We say, “You know it when you see it; it has that sense that you sort of know.” So we have a self-regulating observation. My concern is that decisions on whether the Committee has been impugned are made by the Committee itself. It would decide whether it felt it had been impugned and then make that recommendation to us as a House of Commons to advise whether we agreed with it or not. However, if our habit is ordinarily to agree with the report, there is really no way to work out whether someone has been impugned or not. As may have been said in this House already, if we look through some of the specific examples—I understand that there are others—we see that some may not fit everyone's definition of “impugning integrity”. Both in the phrasing and, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) said, in the fact that it does not accord in respect of the Standards Committee and the way it is interpreted, there are major issues with that part of this.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Member is making a good point about the point at which what one person says impugns someone else. Does he agree that a good guide is often the harm principle? All of us in this place support completely, I think, the concept and the actuality of freedom of speech, but when that harms or is unfair to others, it has to be regarded as unacceptable in its effect. The freedom of speech to criticise the Committee to the point where that undermines the Committee, this House and, by its nature, democracy is unacceptable.

Richard Fuller: The hon. Lady makes a fair point, although I have two contentions with it. First, on the specifics, the point I was making is that the determination of whether that constitutes harm is put in a report by the people concerned, which then comes back here for us to support, so there is very little review. Secondly, an interesting underlying issue is that we are living through a period when harm is being interpreted differently. The way that people who are much younger than me appreciate how harm is done is different. The amount they are prepared to take on themselves—rather than to say, “Well, that's just the way the world is,” and not to see it as harm—is much less than it was in my day. That might be a good thing or a bad thing, but it is different for different generations. That is another aspect of how to assess what is harmful, and we are going through such a fluid period that it is difficult.

But the hon. Lady is right: ultimately, I think we would agree, the message today, at the core of this, is to use temperate language. When I came back to the House in 2019, one thing I noticed was how much more coarse political discourse had become in just the two-year period that I was away. It was not just because of the divisions over Brexit or social media; it was also because we were tolerating it. We have a responsibility in this House to oppose that. That is why it is good when we talk across the divide in this House and find agreement, and why that Committee, in cross-party agreement among individuals, was something that we could rely on. The lesson is about using temperate language.

I share the concerns of my colleagues about some of the recommendations. Not only are they difficult to see working in practice, but there will be chilling effects on free speech. We will have to see whether that is the case. I am not defending what was said; I just worry that someone like me, who does not know the law or “Erskine May”, will feel that there are certain things that I may not be able to say, but which perhaps in the past I was—although there are perhaps ways to give reassurances on that.

Lia Nici: Does my hon. Friend not believe that there has already been a chilling effect? When we debated the fifth Privileges Committee report, some colleagues were too scared to come here and speak, because they were put under threat by other Members of the House. I was one of only four who dared to come out and express a different opinion, and ensure that we had a rounded debate.

Richard Fuller: I hear what my hon. Friend has said. I do not know whether people would say that, but that should clearly not happen in this House. All Members should have the right, and the willingness, to speak without fear or favour. But when I protest about that,

[Richard Fuller]

I should equally defend that right for members of the Committee. They should be able to look at the issues that they wish to review without fear or favour.

My concern with the motion is that it is perhaps a little too overreaching in what it seeks to do, and is not well structured in its solution and remedies. It has opened up questions that probably need further investigation by other Committees, so that we can achieve something that ultimately provides all Members of this House with clarity on how they should behave and communicate with one another.

6.54 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): At the closing stages of what has already been a very long debate, one thing has emerged very clearly: it is a thankless task indeed to be involved in issues of this sort.

I would like to congratulate speakers on both sides of the argument—not necessarily both sides of the House—for the contributions they have made, most notably those who have made the point that they have friends on both sides of the argument. That is true of me as well. If I were to single out two particular speeches on opposite sides of the argument, I would first congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) on giving a masterclass in how to defuse a very fraught and serious subject with good humour while still making his case lucidly. I would also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) for her excellent focus on the heart of the matter, which is to ask the question: is anyone seriously suggesting that the seven members of the Committee, who went through this exhaustive process, were blinded by hatred and bias?

I have been in the House since 1997, and I hope, with luck, to carry on a little bit longer. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) is in his last Parliament, and I have known him very well since he came in in 2005. I challenge anybody who knows my hon. Friend at all well to believe for one moment that he would allow himself to be blinded by prejudice and bias in an inquiry of this sort. It is inconceivable.

There is a tendency in controversial areas such as this never to know when to stop. I remember having an argument with the then Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), from whom we heard at length this afternoon, in the run-up to the debate about Owen Paterson. At that time, the Privileges Committee had produced a report with a very strong sanction. I had been shocked that that process had continued after Owen Paterson's wife had committed suicide. My argument was to suggest to the then Leader of the House and the people in my party that it would be sensible to note the Privileges report, but to decide on compassionate grounds to take no further action. That lost out to an alternative policy and we all know where that led. It did not lead anywhere any good for Owen Paterson himself, the Government of the day or the reputation of this House. It was a case of not knowing when to stop.

I came to the debate this afternoon fully expecting that the Opposition might move an amendment arguing for sanctions against the seven people who were named in an appendix to the report. Had that been put to a Division, I would have voted against it; and had it

nevertheless been agreed and had there been a Division on the amended motion, I would have voted against that as well. In my opinion, the Speaker was very wise not to select any of the amendments, on either side of the argument.

The one argument that I have heard against the way in which the Committee has conducted itself that carries any weight with me is this: I think it was unwise to name specific Members in an appendix, when all that the appendix did was give samples, as we have heard, of the sort of extreme criticism bordering on, and perhaps constituting, abuse to which the Committee was being subjected. The Committee would have been wiser to anonymise those quotes. It could have made the point just as effectively without then giving reason to people to feel—with some justification, I think—that they should at least have been informed that they were going to be named. I know the Committee will say, “Well, they’ve had their chance today to set their comments in context,” and some of them have done so.

Nevertheless, there is one other key point, with which I will conclude, that lies at the heart of the matter. When Members engage with a process that is going to judge them in some way, or at least make recommendations as to how they should be judged, which the House of Commons will then decide whether or not to agree with, and when Members accept that process, then they really ought to accept the result; otherwise, they should not have engaged with the process in the first place.

I close with an example of that, which I have asked my parliamentary researcher's permission to mention. My parliamentary researcher is a lady called Nina Karsov. As an infant, she survived the holocaust. In 1967 she was put on trial in Poland for keeping an anti-communist political diary. She refused to engage with the court because she did not recognise its legitimacy. She knew what that would cost her: she spent two years of a three-year sentence in a Polish jail, until Amnesty International made her prisoner of the year, which helped get her released and brought to this country.

The fact is that if you are not prepared to accept the verdict of the umpire, don't play cricket. I am getting increasingly fed up with the brutalisation of language in discussions of this sort, but I have limited sympathy for those people who get into trouble because of tweets and emails. If they open themselves up to that sort of thing, that is precisely what they should expect.

7.1 pm

Mr Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who made a powerful speech. I am delighted to be called to speak in this extremely important debate. For me, the debate is about respect for this House, its decisions, its processes and its Committees. I have an awful lot to cover so, with due respect to the House and to hon. Members, I will not take any interventions.

In the early morning of 13 December 2019, I and just over 100 ordinary people on the Government Benches, and a few on the Opposition Benches, were, in the majority of cases, taken from our ordinary lives and ordered, with two days' notice, to report to Westminster. I remember being completely overawed, but above all the emotions I felt there were two overwhelming feelings: those of duty and respect—respect for this place, the

institutions of Parliament, the legacy and the unyielding burden of responsibility to uphold the finest traditions of public service.

Some will say, quite reasonably, that I have failed to live up to those traditions; others will disagree—I will speak more about that later. But suffice it to say, I felt a huge weight of expectation to serve the community in which I grew up, which had done me the honour of sending me to this place to speak on its behalf. I still feel that today. I do not make all the right decisions—Mr Deputy Speaker, I defy you to show me anyone who does—but I try my very best to do as good a job as I can, to help as many people as I can, and, within those efforts, I am able to make some amends for any mistakes that I may have made and to work in the best traditions of this House.

During my time here, I have met some amazing people. One of the first people I met, in the Park Plaza, where we were all initially encamped, was the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), who is a remarkable man—I consider him a friend and hope he would return the sentiment. I do not think it will come as a surprise to anyone to know that he has a particular style and turn of phrase that do not always land well with some people. It might be because he tells the unvarnished truth about things, but he gets abused by certain elements of the media and Members of the Opposition for his opinions and views, and he is shouted at across the Chamber every time he gets to his feet. Many Members have talked today about the lack of respect that we sometimes have for each other, and there is a lack of respect for him, as an elected MP, who, if I am any judge, will be the hon. Member for Ashfield long after most of the occupants of these Benches have been sent on their way.

I have met some lifelong friends here. I have also met some people who, quite frankly, I would never get tired of seeing locked in a set of stocks and pelted with rotten vegetables. Not all the friends are on the Government Benches, and not all the stocks-worthy individuals are on the Opposition Benches. Regardless of any personal feelings I may have for anyone, the most important thing has been to treat people in this place with respect, at the very least until they have proven that they deserve no such consideration.

The first day I reported for duty here, I was struck by the things that most normal people would probably feel: the history and the thought of all the people who have walked these halls before us—the giants of British politics. I hoped that my colleagues and I would all be able to live up to their legacies, as we tried our best to shape the future for our country.

Sad as some people found it, I tried my best to become an expert on procedure—well, as much of an expert as I could anyway. It was nothing like the amazing depth of knowledge that the House and Committee Clerks demonstrate on a daily basis, but enough that I did not make any foolish mistakes, say the wrong thing in the wrong place or do anything to embarrass myself, my party or, most importantly, the House. I am a firm believer that this place is amazing. It is special and should be respected and defended by every Member until we are no longer Members, and even afterwards.

Those closest to me have told me, at various times over the past couple of years, to walk away when the arduous nature of the job was becoming too much.

“Get out of that toxic place,” they said. We have heard Members recently say that they will not be standing in the next election, some of them using those very words. But it is not true. This is not a toxic place; it is an amazing place full of history, majesty, responsibility and duty. Sadly, it is made toxic by some of its inhabitants and by the constant “politicians versus the people” narrative, which rains down on the public from every possible news media outlet. Some of those outlets are on the right and some are on the left, but they are all consistent in their position that politicians, of whatever political affiliation, are not to be trusted. I believe that one of the most damaging things currently in our society is the constant drive by the media to try to make politicians the enemies of the people.

Just this weekend, I saw one prominent newspaper declaring significant conflicts of interests because MPs hold huge shareholdings in particular companies. Some of the shareholdings were part of a blind trust that the beneficiaries had no means of controlling or even knowing about. Some of the shareholdings were huge sums, such as £2.69 in Sainsbury’s shares, or a holding of £4.36 in Lloyds Banking Group. Some of the more notable amounts were accentuated by an asterisk, denoting shares held by a close family member, as if being related to an MP means that people are somehow barred from investing their money. It was just another example of the attempts by certain sections of the media to paint us all as the enemy, in the hope that the mere hint of impropriety and an inflammatory headline will be enough for clicks.

It is no longer about selling papers; it is about clicks. Imagine the disappointment of the reader who clicked on the salacious headline

“Exclusive. Shares held ‘in secret’ by scores of MPs raise questions about vested interests”,

only to read that an hon. Member has £4.82 invested with NatWest. It is another headline and another nail in the coffin, promoting the narrative that the people who come to work in this place are always trying to pull a fast one, worthy of disdain and there to be abused. In my very limited experience, the reality is that the vast majority of people come to this House to do good things. They work damned hard and, in the main, do an excellent job as Members of Parliament, in what have been, over the past couple of years, some of the most trying times in modern British political history.

But some things that have happened over the past few months have left me sad. I am a traditionalist and I believe that things like respect for the House and its processes matter. Without that, this place loses some of its legitimacy and, in the environment that I just described, where there is a constant search for reasons to write negatively about us and this place, we do not need to commit these acts of internal damage as well. There are enough people out there willing and eager to tear us down, so let us not do it to ourselves as well.

On 21 April 2022, the House debated for about five hours a motion to open an inquiry of the Committee of Privileges into whether the conduct of the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, amounted to a contempt of the House. At the end of the debate, the motion was put and carried with no dissenting voices. Following the withdrawal by the previous Chair from chairing the inquiry, the appointment of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) was tabled by the Government and approved by the

[Mr Rob Roberts]

whole House in June 2022, with no dissenting voices—quite rightly. I will not restate the contents of this special report, but I have listened carefully to the arguments made on both sides.

The argument for freedom of speech is powerful indeed. We live in a society in which freedom of speech is absolutely crucial, especially in this place. Parliamentarians must be allowed to say what they want to say without the fear of reprisal—and we can in this place. There is a reason that parliamentary privilege does not extend past those doors—it is because it is a privilege. Freedom of speech is an important right, but it is not an absolute right. With freedom comes responsibility, and in this type of situation, having established the inquiry without dissent, appointed the Chair without dissent, and appointed the Committee members without dissent, Members have then lost the right to criticise later. It is the same principle as when I was a member of the general public a few years ago.

When debating an issue of politics, I would ask someone, “How did you vote in the last election?” They would say, “I didn’t bother to vote.” My reaction was, “Well, you don’t get to criticise, then.” The same holds true here. Members had the opportunity to voice their concerns and object and they did not. It should not then be open to Members to impugn the reputation of the Committee, of the people who have been chosen to serve. They were put in place to do a job. There were seven members: four Conservatives; two from Labour; and one from the SNP. They included: the longest-serving female MP in the House and a King’s Counsel; two members who have been awarded knighthoods for their long and meritorious service to this place; and one who is a distinguished magistrate and an impartial upholder of the law. I am sure the others are equally noteworthy, but I do not know them so well.

I feel almost uniquely placed to comment on this subject, as I have been investigated, found to have transgressed, and sanctioned by a process of this House. Yet, out of respect for this place, I have remained silent. In May 2021, I was found to have broken the House’s sexual misconduct policy, following a lengthy investigation, and was suspended from the service of the House. I believed at the time that the judgment was wrong. That remains my belief. I have been told a number of times that I cannot say anything about the situation that deviates from that report, which I believe to be in error. Out of respect for the House and its processes, and at significant personal cost, I have said nothing, so as not to bring myself, the process or the House into disrepute. I feel comfortable in saying only that I believe it to be in error as this is relatively self-evident, given that I appealed the decision in the first place. Other than saying that the judgment was wrong, I make no further comment on the situation, out of respect for the processes of this House.

When I subsequently received death threats and demands for an explanation, I said nothing, out of respect for the processes of this House. When people who I thought were friends in this place averted their eyes or turned away when I bumped into them in the corridor and said hello, I said nothing, out of respect for the processes of this House. When my own party abandoned me and lied to my face just at the point I was most in need of their help, I said nothing, out of respect for the processes of this House.

When week after week, the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), stood at the Dispatch Box and called for me to resign, I said nothing out of respect for the House. When I received an email to say that she was going to refer to me again at the Dispatch Box on 8 July 2021, a time when I was at my lowest point and in need of assistance, I replied to that email. I respectfully asked her not to raise my situation again almost two months down the line as I had served my sanction, and continually raising the point at every turn in order to inflame the situation was having an extremely detrimental effect on my mental health. She ignored my request and brought it up anyway, as well as several more times, with the knowledge that it was causing significant distress. Had this been the case anywhere other than in this Chamber, it would quite rightly have easily fitted the criteria of the House’s definition of bullying, but, in this Chamber, she got a free pass. I said nothing, only out of respect for the processes of this House.

When, at one particularly low point, I found myself balanced on the handrail of Westminster Bridge, I found the will to step backwards instead of forwards and to seek help. A good friend from these Benches intervened and I am in his debt. I have been in counselling for more than a year. It is probably a good point to mention the amazing Parliamentary Health and Wellbeing team, and one individual on that team in particular, without whom I would be in a very different place. We have discussed so many aspects of my life and the events of the past couple of years. The therapy relationship is a little bit like a confession. It was in a private room where I could say what I wanted and unburden myself of the difficulties that I was facing—things that I could not say anywhere else. I had so much to say, but, publicly, I said nothing out of respect for the processes of this House. When I stood up to ask a question at Prime Minister’s questions, with friends in the Public Gallery, a member of the Labour Front Bench shouted, “You can sit the eff down”, I said nothing out of respect for the processes of this House.

It continues, Mr Deputy Speaker. There are major local events that I have been fighting against in my constituency—they are nationally significant and newsworthy issues. BBC Wales refuses to interview me about them, because I have always refused to go on the record and talk about my case. It means that I am not as able as I otherwise would be to represent the views of my communities on this important matter, but I will not talk about it, out of respect for the processes of this House.

If, after all that, I can get through my days and do my job to the best of my abilities without speaking out and without undermining the processes of this House on something that has personally affected me so profoundly, I find it really difficult to take when others, particularly those who have historically stood in this place and purported to champion the best traditions of the House, undermine it, discredit it and abuse it.

I draw my remarks to an end. I wrote a personal, handwritten note to every member of the Committee recently to thank them for their service in extremely difficult circumstances. I thank them again verbally now. I hope that they are not still suffering any after effects stemming from that service, and I hope that hon. and right hon. Members from all parts of the House reflect on this hopefully concluding melodrama and

consider that this House, its Committees and the whole institute of Parliament are deserving of a lot more respect than they are currently receiving.

7.17 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I start by agreeing with my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) in relation to his comments on my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker), who is currently not in his place. I have to agree that he is one of the kindest, finest and fairest Members in this place, and we should be so pleased that he has served on this important Committee.

I was not going to speak today, but, at the weekend, I spoke to constituents about the weighty matters before the House today. They said to me that, as the Member for Dover and Deal, I should speak up. That is because our white cliffs stand for freedom—freedom of expression, democracy, and our fundamental British values. They said to me that they felt that this House had lost its way. They said that the very idea that a Member of Parliament could be gagged or censured for saying what they thought on a matter was the type of thing that could happen in Russia or Beijing; it is not something that they thought could ever happen here. That tells me that my constituents think that this Committee has overreached itself. The implications of such overreach can only be toxic to our democracy. That reminded me that whether or not it is my wish to speak today, it is certainly my duty to stand here and say that what is happening is wrong and unconstitutional.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Lady reminds me of something I learned as a very young reporter—that the Members of this place have the very rare privilege of having absolute privilege over what they say, in this place. As an older journalist, I had the honour of teaching that to younger journalists, who respect the fact that we have absolute privilege over what we say. Would she not agree that we should respect that and that if we abuse it, that is unacceptable? That is what we are discussing here today—the fact that hon. Members have abused the absolute privilege that they have and undermined the processes of the House.

Mrs Elphicke: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention; abuse of privilege is something I will be addressing very shortly.

The Privileges Committee and the Standards Committee are Select Committees of this House. That is the constitutional position, and I was grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), the Chair of the Procedure Committee, for setting out the position of the Committee so clearly earlier. I thank her for that.

As every Member knows, the Select Committees are a political construct. They are political in their nature and they come to political decisions. Debates and votes in this Chamber are political—because that is what we do. We are politicians. That is what we are sent here to do. The job of a politician has no professional standing or qualification, neither is it a trade. It has a no entry requirement—not even maths or English GCSE—because we are the Commons. We are the most base and broad range of people, from all walks of life and all types of characters. From the very charismatic to the downright dull,

all can stand, and the people decide whether or not they want us to represent them and their interests. That is what it means to be a Member of Parliament.

Make no mistake: today's decision, like any other Select Committee report or recommendation that is brought to this House for us to decide, is political, and the vote at the end of this debate will be political too. Should the motion be pressed to a vote, we will see all of the Opposition together in the same Lobby—the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and Labour—and we should have no illusion about the politics going on here, as we have heard in the opening remarks of those on the Opposition Front Benches.

To be a politician, at its very core, is to debate, to explain, to agree or to disagree. That is what we are elected to do. We are not elected to sit in some sort of pretend court of law. As has been found throughout history, when the Commons goes down the route of censuring or expelling Members for partisan political purposes, it invariably damages Parliament itself.

I will point to a very famous example of that, the Middlesex by-election fiasco that saw the repeated expulsion of John Wilkes, against the will of the people, who kept voting him in. Let me remind the House what the “Encyclopaedia Britannica” has to say on the subject:

“Wilkes was finally expelled on inconclusive precedents and by a method undoubtedly fraught with danger to the constitution since it set aside in the name of parliamentary privilege the right of the elector to choose his representative”.

There is a concern that what is happening with the current Privileges and Standards Committees is not just overriding the right of the electorate to choose their representatives, but, chillingly, limiting what that Member can say.

It has been said on several occasions during this debate that the Privileges Committee is a properly democratically constituted Committee of the House, so let me address that. First, it is not. It is one of the very few Committees of this House whose Chair has not been selected by contested or secret ballot and whose members are not voted on by each party in the usual way, following the Wright Committee reforms. As such, I feel that this Committee has less legitimacy and democratic accountability than other Select Committees, not more.

The Committee should be reformed. It is a time for reform of how it is selected and how it operates, so that it can have the same legitimacy and democratic accountability as other Select Committees enjoy, following the Wright reforms. That reform work is incomplete and we are seeing its failings through problems of due process and otherwise.

Secondly, let me address the issue of questioning and debate. If anybody criticised the work of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, on which I sit, I would not be seeking to censure, name and shame, or even expel them from the House; I would debate them, because it is a political report and it is a matter of political debate. Open political debate is a fundamental British value and fundamental to our way of life and democracy.

Thirdly, I turn to the issue of accountability—or lack of accountability. In this place, we have two Select Committees, the Privileges and Standards Committees, as well as the internal grievance process, all of which have had raised fundamental flaws in natural justice,

[Mrs Elphicke]

due process or bias. Without the ability to challenge injustices, with the reports going through on the nod, as some Members seem to prefer, these Committees could continue unchallenged and unchanged. That surely cannot be what any of us would want.

The issue of accountability is particularly important, because the work of this Committee directly affects the representation of the people. As such, it must be open to being held more accountable than other Select Committees, and not seek to be less accountable than it should be.

Finally, let me address the responsibility that each of us in this House has for our how behaviour and leadership affects other people. This issue matters more widely, because how we lead, or mislead, in this place is followed by companies and organisations across the country. Failures or perceived failures to follow natural justice or due process, acting with bias or punishing by using sweeper clauses on disrepute or reputational matters, give the green light to big businesses and other private sector employers to do likewise.

Up and down the land, people are losing their jobs, their reputations and their savings, and sometimes their families and homes, because of a lack of natural justice, due process, fairness or impartiality in their workplaces, where big businesses and organisations simply abuse their power to achieve the end that they wanted all along. They think it is okay and that they are unaccountable, and they may even think that they are following the example of this place. I say this to the House in conclusion: it is not okay and it can never be acceptable. It does not just happen within this place.

What happens in this place ripples out, so that other people in other walks of life—our constituents—may not get a fair hearing, due process or fair treatment, or may be gagged from speaking up for themselves in the face of grave injustices in their lives and workplaces. I was elected here to defend those constituents and to defend our British values, and that is how I will exercise my political and democratic vote today, to vote against this report.

7.28 pm

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): As has been expressed already, people may have many views on Boris Johnson, but what we are here to discuss is the special report. For me, this is about the sense of disappointment that I felt at not having the opportunity to see or comment on the report in advance, or to clarify, as my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) and others have clearly said. That is an opportunity we would have welcomed, so to find out from the media before the report was published was very disappointing.

Of course, many also use that as a criticism of the previous report: while it may have run to 30,000 words, many of us felt we had already read them on Twitter. Where that has come from we do not know and we cannot say for sure, but it is disappointing that these things leak out, as it is with any business that should be brought before this House first. Of course, as has been mentioned, many Members are not included in the annex. There have been many comments on the make-up of the Committee, the outcome and the processes. People

even suggested that the result would be some Conservative stitch-up for Boris Johnson because there is a Conservative majority on the Committee. It has worked both ways. Many accusations will fly around, but many of them will not be true.

One issue I take with the report is its methodology. Seven people here have been chosen, and we are all Brexiteers or vocal supporters of the former Prime Minister. How was that conclusion reached, and how was the annex formed? I think that we have a little more information on how that could be a sample. I welcome that, because it is important that we clarify it. Some of us wonder whether it was done based on the number of complaints, for example. Some of us made interesting comments on social media and perhaps attracted more complaints than others.

Let us remember that we have been through an unprecedented situation. Those are the circumstances we all found ourselves in and why we are here today. We saw the removal of a Prime Minister with a large majority. He was subject to an inquiry, then a sanction was recommended that ultimately led to his resignation as a Member of this House, and his parliamentary pass was taken from him. Those were unprecedented steps to take against a former Prime Minister.

Whatever the rights and wrongs, we are here to debate the report, and I do not want to diverge too much from that, but many have compared the situation to a court of law. As has rightly been said, many have expectations of natural justice on this, but the Privileges Committee is a Committee of the House, not a court. Parliamentary sovereignty is paramount—although I always make the point that the people are truly sovereign in this country—but it is still important that the process is seen to be fair, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) said so eloquently and far more entertainingly earlier.

Let me go through some of the comments by Members outlined in the annex. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield said that:

“questions will need to be asked”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Workington said:

“When the witch hunt has been forgotten, future generations will look back in astonishment.”

At no point does that comment mention the Committee itself or its individual members. Similarly, although I may have made rather robust comments myself, I did not speak about Committee members specifically, and I just want to clear that up.

Likewise, my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) commented. One comment of hers that was included in the annex was from 15 June at 10.44 am, nearly two hours after the report was released. The report states that Members are free to make whatever comments they wish once the report is final, so why has that comment been referred to in the annex?

Many of us take issue with the annex. I think that we can appreciate the points that are made in the report. Some of us, myself included, would have preferred the whole matter not to have been referred to the Committee in the first place. That is not, of course, the fault of the Committee members themselves. As I have stated on numerous occasions and in many media interviews, I fully respect the job that they had to do. It was important that they be left to get on with it. I also did

not comment specifically on the report until it was published, but my constituents would expect me to question it and to scrutinise the events leading up to it.

At this point, I thank the members of the Committee. Theirs was a thankless task, and whatever decision they came to—be it on this or any other matter—they simply could not win. I thank them for their service in delivering the report, and even though I do not agree with its conclusions or the sanctions, I respect the fact that they were in that position. I urge others outside the House to do the same. I hope that we can bring the matter to a close after this evening.

Any comments that I made with regard to the resignation of the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip were related to comments that he made in his statement, not to the full report itself. I want to clarify that. I did not, of course, have a copy of the report until it was released. At that point, we were free to comment on it. That relates to my tweet of 9 June, which is mentioned in the annex to the special report.

I believe that it was our responsibility as parliamentarians to read and respond to the original report. I have been honoured to be a member of numerous Select Committees in my time, and I would expect to do the same for any such report when it is published, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) said. I believe that effective scrutiny is one of the great strengths of this institution. I would not want that to change. The report itself states that its conclusions were not influenced and no intimidation occurred.

On the importance of scrutiny by Members, I hope the House will excuse me if I paraphrase the great quote from “Gladiator”: “Is this not why we are here?” We are here to scrutinise this House; we are here to scrutinise the work that we do. We must do that respectfully. It is the point of our being here. I am not quite in as good a shape as Russell Crowe was in that movie—certainly not since putting on the parliamentary stone.

Although respect for the House and for process is important, we must also be able to engage and scrutinise where relevant. I strongly refute the idea that I or other Members impugned or deliberately impugned the integrity of the Committee. I therefore clarify once again that any comments made prior to full publication were directed not at them or the ongoing inquiry specifically, but at the circumstances surrounding the unprecedented situation that we all found ourselves in.

I want to talk about our international reputation and what it looks like to others. Democracy in this country is very much a beacon—as is this House—and something that people look to and admire, and we should uphold it, with free speech, due process, and free and fair accountability in the face of despotic regimes around the world. I want that to continue. I was very disappointed by one amendment—I am pleased that it was not selected—because that would have set a poor example to people. I found it neither liberal nor democratic. I am proud to be a Member of this House and to serve my Bassetlaw constituents. The events of the last few weeks have left me disappointed that the issues that they care about are being sidelined in order for politicians to criticise other politicians for criticising politicians. We owe it to our constituents to do better.

This week I saw GB News refer to a number of us, with a mocked-up poster, as the “Magnificent Seven”. I suppose one thing that we have in common with the

characters in that film is that we all want to keep our villagers happy, and that is certainly a good start. I probably ought to end the comparisons at that point, as I believe that there are only three of them left at the end of the film, and I am hoping that a full seven of us remain by the end of the debate. We have certainly heard some powerful contributions. I respect this House, and I hope now that we can all come together for a far happier ending.

7.38 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith) for his comments on the Privileges Committee. I will make a few short points in relation to comments that have been made in the debate.

First, having spent more than a year considering the privilege matter referred to the Committee, I am certain that every member of the Committee believes in the right of MPs to speak their minds. However, MPs have special rights, and it is those rights that the Privileges Committee considers. The Committee is there to ensure that those rights are used appropriately and protected.

Members are perfectly entitled to say what they think about a Privileges Committee report once that report is published—in fact, we expect that—but while the investigation is taking place, I think, and I think the House believes, that Members should refrain from making public comments. In fact, the House approved the Commons code of conduct, which is clear that that is the intent of this House. Chapter 4 states that Members must not

“lobby the Committee or the Commissioner in a manner calculated to influence their consideration of the matter. The Committee on Standards and Privileges has regarded any breach of this rule as particularly serious and it alone has led to suspension from the House.”

Members are perfectly entitled to speak out when they do not agree with the Privileges Committee’s findings. They have the right to object to and to vote on Members appointed to the Committee, and subsequently to raise any alleged conflicts on a point of order. They can vote against the motion of referral or seek to amend a motion; they can comment on the Committee’s procedure to the Committee itself or to the House; and they can submit evidence to the Committee and debate, vote and comment publicly on the Committee’s final report, as Members have done.

In the three and a half years that I have been a member of the Privileges Committee, I have never once been lobbied directly by a Member of Parliament, but I have received more than 600 emails attempting to influence on this particular motion. My view is that the rule in the Members code of conduct is there to protect both Members and Committee members. Those appointed to the Committee should be free to deliberate without interference, and those who face allegations should know that anyone’s attempts to interfere will be rejected and they could face contempt proceedings. There is a belief that such interference would always be aimed at reducing the sentence, but there is no reason why Members cannot lobby to increase the sentence; were anyone to try to do that, they would equally be rejected.

I am aware that some Members believe that the Committee overreached by making this special report, but I do not agree. Any Committee has the right to make a special report commenting on matters of concern

[Andy Carter]

that have arisen during an inquiry. The 1947 resolution of the House makes it clear that the Privileges Committee can consider and report on not just a matter specifically referred to it, but facts surrounding and reasonably connected with it. This is the matter that has been referred here. The special report deals with matters in the public domain; it is not an investigation into alleged contempt by any Members named in it. It does not explicitly say that the Committee believes the Members named committed a contempt; nor, therefore, does it recommend any sanctions. Were any Member of this House referred to a future Committee, it would be incumbent on all the members of the existing Committee to resign, because we would not be able to consider any issue that arose from this report.

Finally, I want to say a few words about fairness of process. The Committee received excellent advice, impartial and authoritative, from Clerks of the House and, most importantly, from Speaker's Counsel and Sir Ernest Ryder, a Lord Justice of Appeal and Senior President of Tribunals. Both have ensured that the process we undertook allowed natural justice and was fair to all involved.

There is a risk to the systems of this House. Members will simply not be willing to serve on a Committee if they are not allowed to take decisions in an environment that affords them space to do so in a fair and appropriate manner. I approached this case with a totally open mind—in fact, I believe that all members of the Committee did. In a previous determination in July 2021 in relation to Mr Johnson's declarations of a holiday he had received, we approached that, too, with a completely open mind. In that case, we challenged what was being reported by the commissioner; we sought more information, and ultimately, despite the commissioner recommending a finding of a breach of the code, the Committee decided not to accept that and overturned the findings. In this case, before the case had begun, Members of the House of Lords were making allegations of bias, suggesting that we had already prejudged the report. The allegations are simply without merit and there is no evidence to support them.

The special report is about ensuring that this House can continue to follow the procedures and rules that are set out for this House. I urge Members to support the motion.

7.44 pm

Penny Mordaunt: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank all Members who have taken part in the debate. I welcome their consideration of the issues at hand. Given the nature of the debate, I wish to make a few points in closing.

First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) just confirmed, the Committee is entitled to make this report. For those who are interested, the reference is chapter 38.51 of "Erskine May". Secondly, to respond to the point made by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), the Committee

suggested no sanction—that was not an ask it made of the House—and, having heard the debate, I do not think there is any appetite to do any such thing.

Various Members have pointed to elements of the report that they agree with and find uncontroversial—section B in particular—as well as others that they disagree with and find controversial. In the same way, there were mixed opinions on different aspects of the original substantive report. In that respect, this debate perhaps matters more than any vote that might follow it, but I will repeat the points I made in the substantive debate. If the motion is pressed to a vote, hon. Members must use their judgment. Whether they agree or disagree, or both agree and disagree and therefore abstain, they are entitled to do that and should be left alone to do so.

During the lengthy speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), I found my mind turning to the parable of the four blindfolded men who encountered an elephant. One felt its tail and said it was a rope, one its leg and said it was a tree, one its ear and said it was fan, and one its trunk and said it was a snake, but none could tell that there was an elephant in the room. Although I have nothing against pettifogging over "Erskine May"—in fact, a large part of my day, every day, is spent doing precisely that—I do not want us to miss the bigger picture. We have a duty of care to each other. Free speech is vital for us to do our jobs, and with that comes responsibility. We have a duty, for the protection of our own rights and privileges, to the Privileges Committee and those who sit on it.

We are at our best in this place when we say, "Sorry," if we have transgressed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) has done, ever so savvily. We are at our best when we are kind and generous to those who have done us wrong, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Sir Charles Walker) has been today, and when we turn up and step up to do what we think is right, even though there was no expectation that we would, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris) has done today. We all shoulder the responsibility of defending this House, and we should remember that, from time to time, that burden falls disproportionately on some shoulders. That should not be a thankless task. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That this House,

(a) notes with approval the Special Report from the Committee of Privileges;

(b) considers that where the House has agreed to refer a matter relating to individual conduct to the Committee of Privileges, Members of this House should not impugn the integrity of that Committee or its members or attempt to lobby or intimidate those members or to encourage others to do so, since such behaviour undermines the proceedings of the House and is itself capable of being a contempt; and

(c) considers it expedient that the House of Lords is made aware of the Special Report and this Resolution, so that that House can take such action as it deems appropriate.

Electronic Trade Documents Bill [Lords]*Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered.
Third Reading*

7.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Paul Scully): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Let me take this opportunity to thank all the Members of this House and in the other place who have spoken in support of this transformational Bill, as well as those who contributed to scrutinising the Bill so deeply and effectively during its passage. The Bill has followed the special parliamentary procedure for Law Commission Bills. That procedure demonstrates that good and much-needed legislation that has already been thoroughly consulted on by the Law Commission can be introduced, debated and amended if required in an efficient and democratic way, but with reduced burdens on an already busy Parliament. Apart from the minor changes made to extend this critical legislation satisfactorily to the whole of the UK, the Bill that is before the House remains the work of the Law Commission. I also thank the officers and Members of the Scottish Parliament for their work in enabling that to happen so smoothly.

The Bill is a fine piece of work. It is informed by experts from academia, the legal profession and, crucially, the industries that stand to benefit most from its introduction and will be the driving force behind its implementation. As English law is the foundation of international trade, the Bill will put the United Kingdom ahead of not only the G7 countries, but almost the whole world. The UK is setting the approach that other jurisdictions will seek to follow, not just on the digitalisation of trade documents but on the future digitalisation of all trade, towards which the Bill is an important first step.

I record my thanks to Professor Sarah Green and her colleagues at the Law Commission, including Laura Burgoyne, Daniella Lupini and Siobhan McKeering, for their diligent work. I also thank Oliver Tones, the Bill manager, and Bobby Lawson, his deputy, along with the committed Government lawyers who have contributed to this, specifically Simon Brandon, Louise Dennison and Chris Callan. Thanks are also due to my private secretary, Jack Collins, who has ably assisted me and the Bill team throughout.

The Bill has global transformational potential. It will place the UK at the forefront of international trade as a thought leader for others to follow, and will save businesses an estimated £1.1 billion over the next 10 years—really tangible benefits, as well as being inspirational thought leaders for global trade. As such, I commend it to the House.

7.51 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a very rare thing in this place to have the pleasure and privilege of responding on behalf of the Opposition to a Bill that we wholeheartedly support. For that reason, I will keep my comments brief.

As we know, the Bill follows a report and recommendations by the Law Commission. As the Minister has said, it seeks to remove the current legal impediment to producing documents in electronic form, allowing

them to be legally recognised in the same way as paper documents, provided that they meet certain tests. It also sets out provisions relating to how the change of medium between electronic and paper documents will work in practice. It is an incredibly important Bill, particularly in a post-Brexit world where substantial red tape is having significant consequences for our ability to trade with the rest of the world. Labour sees the Bill as going some way towards unlocking that red tape by hopefully speeding up those processes.

We all know that central to international trade is the moving of goods across borders in order to get them from the seller to the buyer. That process typically involves multiple actors, including those involved in transportation, insurance, finance and logistics. One trade finance transaction can typically involve around 20 entities, and between 10 and 20 paper documents totalling over 100 pages. In a transaction covered by a bill of lading, for example, it is common to find 50 sheets of paper in a package of shipping documents that must be exchanged between as many as 30 different parties.

Despite the size and sophistication of the international trade market, many of its processes and the laws underlying them are based on practices developed by merchants hundreds of years ago. In particular, international trade still relies to a large extent on a special category of document that entitles the holder to claim performance of the obligation recorded in that document, and to transfer the right to claim performance of that obligation by transferring physical possession of the actual document. That document is said to embody the obligation, which may be to deliver goods or to pay money, rather than to merely evidence it. For example, a bill of lading is a document used in the carriage of goods by sea that, when transferred to the buyer or any subsequent lawful holder, gives that holder constructive possession of the goods described in the bill and a right to claim delivery of them from the carrier. The law governing those documents is premised on the idea that they can be physically held, or “possessed”. Industries using those documents are therefore prevented by law from moving to a fully paperless process.

To give a sense of the enormous amount of paperwork that international trade generates, the world’s largest container ships can carry 24,000 twenty-foot containers at any one time on any one voyage. For each of those cargoes, paper transport documentation has to be produced. That documentation must be processed manually to go from the shipper of the goods to the ultimate buyer at the destination, sometimes through numerous intermediaries. The effect of the current law is that much of the documentation needs to be in hard physical copy. The Digital Container Shipping Association has estimated that 16 million original bills of lading were issued by ocean carriers in 2020, and that more than 99% of those were in paper form. The Minister does not need reminding of the significant environmental cost of that way of working.

For those reasons, we support the Bill in its entirety. We see it as a long-overdue reform that allows for the legal recognition of certain types of documents used in trade and trade finance in electronic form. That will mean that parties can finally use the law that currently applies to paper trade documents when transacting with electronic trade documents. It was great of the Minister to confirm in Committee that the Department

[Alex Davies-Jones]

for Business and Trade will manage this legislation. We were concerned about where responsibility would actually sit, given that the Bill was brought forward by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Law Commission. We recognise and welcome that clarification and I am grateful to the Minister for it.

Labour sees the Bill as a valuable tool in ensuring that the world of trade and commerce operates as smoothly and efficiently as possible, and that UK businesses are not disadvantaged in any way. Ultimately, that is what we all want to see.

7.55 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I rise fully in support of the Bill, and congratulate the Government and the Minister on the extraordinary work they have done on it. I also congratulate all Members from the House of Lords and the Opposition, and all the individuals and officials, who have done so much to make a Bill that might on its face look very unattractive and unexciting something that I believe to be extremely exciting.

I have made no secret of the fact that, before I got into this place, my background was in trade. I understand well the value of bills of lading and the complexities that come with them, but I also stand here as the representative of one of the largest exporting fishing ports in the United Kingdom, Brixham. There, the concept of documentation and the points that we make about it are absolutely essential to those fishermen's success, and indeed their profitability.

I will be extremely brief, because time marches on this evening. The Bill will streamline trade—it will allow us to do all the things that we very much need to do in an era outside of the European Union, where signing new trade deals offers us new markets, new opportunities and new horizons. When I speak to my fishermen, one of the biggest and most significant causes of concern is the Electronic Trade Documents Bill and putting forward export health certificates and export documentation, as well as import documentation. The Bill will allow us to streamline those processes to make sure that those goods reach their markets. Whether it is fishing, farming, food, goods or shipping, we must ensure that we take full advantage of opportunities to help small businesses across this country that are exporting, as well as those that are importing.

We must look at how the Bill will relate to the European Union and its implementation of similar policies, and must also consider how the Bill will work with Commonwealth countries. We have made no secret of the fact that we want to work more with the Commonwealth, or that through things like the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, we want to be able to do more in terms of trade. This Bill sets the benchmark—we should be unashamed of talking about the value that it can bring to our economy. The Minister and the Opposition have done very well in producing the Bill and working it through to the stage it has reached, but my final congratulations go to the Minister.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend has spoken eloquently about fishing, and has previously raised the subject of fishing with me. Health certificates are not currently

within the scope of the Bill, because they do not relate to possession, but fishermen will definitely benefit from the Bill just as other sectors will.

Anthony Mangnall: As ever, the Minister is incredibly gracious. I appreciate his intervention and thank him for that point, because it will send a message of confidence to my markets, and indeed to fishermen across the country.

I do not need to detain the House any longer, other than to say that the Bill is extremely welcome and we must talk it up. Coupled with the Procurement Bill that we passed just a few weeks ago, we are making real progress in the area of trade. We have to be able to get out there and talk about it.

7.58 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I echo the thanks that have been paid to the Bill teams—the civil servants, both here and in Scotland, who have worked to bring the Bill through. When it was in Committee, a debate on a report from the Privileges Committee was taking place in the Chamber, which seemed to inject a sense of urgency into the Committee proceedings and a feeling that some Members would rather have been elsewhere. Today's debate comes after the debate on the report from the Privileges Committee has concluded, so there is slightly less pressure, and the Bill is getting the airing it deserves.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) was right to take the opportunity to put his points on the record. The Bill is largely technical and uncontroversial, but it is important to put on record some of the key issues that have been identified during its passage, both about its contents and the way in which the Government have taken it through Parliament.

The Bill will ease significantly the regulatory and bureaucratic burdens on businesses by allowing the legal recognition of electronic trade documents. I think the Government themselves reckon that this could be worth over £1 billion in value to the UK's international trade over the next 10 years. As we have heard, hundreds of pages of documents previously required to be produced in physical format—which of course will almost certainly have been generated electronically anyway and then printed off—can now be exchanged digitally, more quickly and more securely.

As enabling and facilitative legislation, the Bill paves the way for further innovation. Last week, I had some fascinating discussions with researchers from the University of Lincoln's Institute for Agri-Food Technology, who were visiting Parliament as part of the annual evidence week activities. They and the many other businesses and academics they work with were very excited about the opportunities this Bill will provide for data sharing and for analytics about the movement of goods, and the opportunities in particular that that could bring, for example, for the reduction of food waste and the environmental impact across the supply chain.

I think I spent slightly longer discussing the Bill with those academics than the Bill spent in its Second Reading Committee, which concluded in just seven minutes, and the Public Bill Committee sat for a grand total of 15 minutes. Their lordships managed slightly better, with a total of about two and half hours of scrutiny across three stages. I think stakeholders must sometimes

look at our proceedings with not a little bemusement, and wonder about the Government's priorities in the allocation and use of time, even if this is an expedited procedure.

Of course, despite the Law Commission's work to develop proposals for the Bill and the various stages of consideration in the House of Lords, it was only when the Bill got to the Committee stage that the Government were finally able to bring forward amendments that would provide Scottish Ministers with the reassurances they needed to recommend that Holyrood consent to the Bill. Without those amendments, there was a serious risk of yet more legislative overreach by the UK Government, straying into areas of Scots law that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament for nearly 25 years.

The Bill has also been scrutinised by two Committees of the Scottish Parliament—the Economy and Fair Work Committee, and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee. The Economy and Fair Work Committee took evidence from the Scottish Government's Minister for Small Business, Innovation and Trade in a session that lasted 23 minutes, which was still one minute longer than the total time taken by this House to consider the Bill until we started this Third Reading consideration.

However, those Committees were ultimately able to agree with the Scottish Government's recommendation that the Scottish Parliament should in the end grant the Bill legislative consent. But they have both, as indeed have Scottish Government Ministers, expressed concern and disappointment at the time it has taken to resolve the challenges identified by the Scottish Government in the Bill, as first presented both to the Lords and to this House. Consensus has finally been reached and, as the Order Paper notes, on 27 June the Scottish Parliament agreed a legislative consent motion.

I hope that means attention can now turn to the implementation of the provisions of the Bill, the easing of bureaucratic burdens, and the innovation in information and data exchange that producers, traders and other stakeholders in supply chains use to keep us fed, clothed and otherwise going about our daily lives.

8.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak on this issue. I will not take too long, you will be glad to hear.

As we are all aware at this stage, the main purpose of the Bill is to provide the shipping industry with the legal mechanism to enable the use of electronic trade documents without the need to engage in complex and often operationally burdensome processes. The hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) referred to the fishing sector, and the Minister replied to him in relation to the concerns that he and I both have about that sector in particular. The fishing sector has always been burdened with the bureaucracy of Europe, and we always hoped that, whenever we got changes, those burdens might be lessened, but for us in Northern Ireland that really has not been the case.

I have long been an advocate of cutting unnecessary red tape. That was often one of my gripes with Europe, as I watched small-scale farmers who knew their land, their herds and their crops like the back of their hand, yet were asked to fill in forms that ranged from 20 to 70 pages, and sometimes more, for their grants. The result

of all this is additional stress and the cost of paying consultants to help with what was and is avoidable. For those of us used to being in an office, printing or scanning is simple—so simple, in fact, that we sometimes forget that not every household in the UK has the facilities to do that. This is why I always advocate the need to bring along those who are not tech savvy, not leave them behind, and that is why the Government bringing forward this Bill tonight is so important.

The beauty of Brexit for those who live here on the mainland—we in Northern Ireland do not currently enjoy that release from European machination—was that such unnecessary bureaucracy would cease, and in my opinion that is what this Bill seeks to do. That is why it is welcome to have it before us, and why we are all very happy with where we are.

With that mindset, I welcome anything that cuts unnecessary red tape, but I still wish to satisfy myself that, while the paperwork format has changed, the necessary security and accountability remains. I do believe, having looked at some of the issues relating to the Bill, that this is the case, but the Minister might wish to confirm that at the end of the debate. The reduction of costs associated with the use of paper trade documents and a shift to a more environmentally friendly system are welcome innovations, along with the development of digital products and services within the shipping industry, with a view to stimulating business growth.

In conclusion, an essential component must be increased security and transparency in shipping documentation. I know that has always been the aim of the Government in introducing the Bill, and I very much welcome that. I hope to see fully achieved what the Minister will sum up at the end. We must make way for progress, while still holding on to systems that work well and are in place, and I do believe that this Bill brings those two aims into working order together. With that in mind, I very much welcome where we are.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET (NO. 2) BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken in two days in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken on the second day and shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) (a) When the Bill has been read a second time it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) When the Order of the Day is read for the House to resolve itself into a Committee on the Bill, the Speaker shall leave the Chair without putting any Question and the House shall resolve itself into a Committee forthwith, whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommend the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(16) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(17) (a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19) (a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on the motion for this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Scott Mann.*)

Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 3 May, 24 May, 21 June and 4 July 2023, on the funding and delivery of public services, HC 1165.]

8.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

In doing so, I once again speak with a strong sense of disappointment. At multiple junctures since becoming Secretary of State last year, I have stood at this Dispatch Box when realistically I should not have been doing so. That sentiment very much applies today, because I believe these decisions should be taken by locally elected politicians.

The Government have brought forward this Bill because the Northern Ireland parties have been unable to form an Executive and subsequently set a budget for this financial year. The Government have therefore been compelled to step in again and set another budget. I set out the headline departmental budget allocations via a written ministerial statement to Parliament on 27 April this year, and this Bill puts those allocations on a statutory footing. We have also published more detailed information in respect of each of the Northern Ireland Departments' spending plans through the main estimates, which I laid as a Command Paper on 3 July.

Today's debate is only the Second Reading of this legislation, with the remaining stages due to take place after the summer recess. The summer therefore presents an opportunity for the Northern Ireland parties to come together as a restored Executive and take their own budget legislation through the Assembly, making the remaining stages of the Bill in this place superfluous.

It is no secret that the pressures on Northern Ireland's public finances are acute. As with the 2022-23 budget, setting this budget was not an easy task, but it was necessary to deliver a balanced budget and provide the Northern Ireland Departments with budget clarity to help get their spending under control. As far as possible, we have aimed to protect frontline public services. In recognition of the pressure on the health service, over half of the total budget is to be spent on health.

Of course, these pressures on Northern Ireland's finances did not appear overnight. Successive former Executives have failed to make the strategic decisions required to put the public finances on a sustainable footing and make public services affordable. The unsustainability of Northern Ireland's finances cannot continue. It is fundamentally the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Executive to run a balanced budget, and until they do, the outcomes for citizens will not improve. That is why the Government stand ready to work with a restored Executive on budget sustainability, including the implementation of revenue-raising measures.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Very quickly, in relation to the budget, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has always referred to the time for the Barnett consequential to be looked at, and the population of Northern Ireland is up some 200,000 in 10 years, and 100,000 in five years. Does the

Secretary of State not agree that it is time to look at the whole budget for Northern Ireland because of the extra population increase and the diverse community we now have? There has to be money in place, but that money has to reflect the demands of our population in Northern Ireland.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point, and we could consider introducing a needs-based factor into the Barnett formula for Northern Ireland—it would be a similar mechanism to that implemented in Wales—to put Northern Ireland's public finances on a more sustainable footing. However, the absence of a functioning Executive has an impact on what can be done to address the systemic issues that Northern Ireland faces. Locally accountable leadership is urgently required to ensure that Northern Ireland has a stable and flourishing economy, and to advocate for reform of Northern Ireland's public finances. To completely answer the hon. Gentleman's point, negotiations between the Welsh Government and the Treasury on a fiscal framework and Barnett formula adjustments took over seven years. This is not an issue that could be solved overnight, even with the best will in the world.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for that confirmation that he is at least willing to discuss considering public finances on the basis of need. Of course, the reason why the Holtham Commission process took so long was that it was the first example of the Government having to get their head around need—they had to understand it, and recognise that the public finances should respond to need. Now that the principle is clear, surely he does not believe that it would take as long this time around.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I very much hope that no discussion with a future Executive would take seven years to come to any conclusion. In the meantime, we have a responsibility to ensure that public services and the management of public funds can continue. That is why I have commissioned a range of information and advice from the Northern Ireland civil service on potential measures for raising more public revenue and otherwise improving the sustainability of public finances in Northern Ireland that an incoming Executive could consider. That is the UK Government's first step in supporting the development of revenue-raising measures in Northern Ireland. It will allow us to better understand the challenges of taking this work forward, and support the Northern Ireland civil service in delivering it. The Government have for many years recognised the unique challenges that Northern Ireland faces. We have provided around £7 billion in extra funding to Northern Ireland since 2014, on top of the Barnett-based block grant.

I am grateful to officials in the Northern Ireland civil service for keeping public services running until an Executive are in place. The Government will continue to support the Northern Ireland civil service where we can, but it is important to note that responsibility for the difficult spending decisions flowing from this budget will ultimately continue to rest with the Northern Ireland Departments in the absence of an Executive. I do not want that to happen, and I encourage the people of Northern Ireland to urge their locally elected politicians to return to Stormont, so that decisions can be taken by those who were democratically elected to do that. As I say, the difficulties that Northern Ireland Departments

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

face are a result of tough decisions not having been taken by elected representatives in Northern Ireland, not just this year, but over successive years. Funding alone will not solve the issues; that will require strong, responsible leadership, backed by a stable, devolved Government. We need the Executive back, so that they can progress much-needed and long-promised public service transformation.

Like others, I welcome the parties' ongoing discussions with the head of the Northern Ireland civil service. There is a great deal of work going on behind the scenes about what a plan for government, and a budget for government, would look like, and how critical issues will be addressed when the Executive come back—issues such as budget sustainability and better, more efficient public services, which should be everyone's priority. However, the head of the Northern Ireland civil service has written to me to say that things now need to become more political. In a way, I agree, but if that is to happen, all the parties must confront hard choices and ensure stability, rather than regular political crisis.

We must restore confidence in the institutions and show the people of Northern Ireland and the world what good devolved government looks like. I look forward to speaking with all the party leaders in the coming weeks, and receiving their proposals for the budget and a programme for government.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): As one of those leaders, may I be absolutely clear? My objective is to ensure that we get solid foundations for the restoration of our devolved Government, and that we do not meet another crisis in six months' time, or a year's time. That is why I will continue to work with the Government to get this right, and to put in place the measures that are necessary to safeguard Northern Ireland's ability to trade within its own country—within the United Kingdom—and its internal market. That is essential to building the stability of which the Secretary of State speaks.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point. He and his party representatives, and indeed all the political parties in Northern Ireland, have been working extremely hard behind the scenes—and in front of the camera, after each occasion—to develop what will, hopefully, be a plan for government, and proposals for the budget. As I say, it is time to bring those proposals forward into more political discussions. I know that each of the political parties will require a little time to develop those plans within their political committees and what have you. I should acknowledge, though, that I have already received budget proposals from the Alliance party, and I would welcome similar engagement from all the other parties.

Before I briefly summarise the intention behind the Bill, I should express my sincere thanks to the Opposition for their continued co-operation with the Government as we seek to bring the Bill forward at the requisite pace. I am particularly grateful to the shadow Northern Ireland Secretary, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), who, as always, has been constructive. I also thank others on the Opposition Front Bench for the way that they have approached the Bill, and my hon. Friend the Member

for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and the Committee members, for their interest in the Bill.

The Bill will place on a legal footing the budget allocations that I outlined to the House via written ministerial statement on 27 April. I am conscious that the hour is already relatively late, and lots of hon. and right hon. Members want to contribute. I therefore do not propose repeating the contents of that written ministerial statement, which sets out the departmental allocations reflected in the Bill.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I am very cognisant of the difficulties that the Secretary of State faces with the Bill, and his frustration at having to deliver it at all. It is clear, though, that the budget for education in Northern Ireland is going down, even though the budget for education in England is going up quite substantially this year. Given the pressures faced in education, and what the Education Committee has heard about those pressures, can he at least confirm to the House what per-pupil spending in Northern Ireland will be after these budget changes? How will it compare with per-pupil spending elsewhere in the UK? Or perhaps the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), can give those figures in his concluding speech.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and acknowledge his long-standing interest in this area. He does great work on the Select Committee. I know that he has read the Institute for Fiscal Studies report published on 21 April, which stated that Northern Ireland spent similar amounts to England and Wales per pupil in 2022-23. Spending per pupil in Northern Ireland grew by 11% in real terms between 2018-19 and 2022-23, after having fallen for almost a decade. I will try to get him the exact details; if I cannot do that by the end of this debate, I shall write to him with them, but we have been following this issue, and he has been prodding us along all the way.

I was talking about the budget's departmental allocations. As in the 2022-23 Northern Ireland budget, the allocations were developed after extensive, sustained engagement with the Northern Ireland civil service. The Bill will mean that Northern Ireland Departments have a total resource budget available of £14.2 billion, and a capital budget of £2.2 billion. That includes the Northern Ireland Executive block grant, set at the 2021 spending review and through the subsequent operation of the Barnett Formula, and income from regional rates.

I emphasise—I will no doubt state this a number of times, in this debate and elsewhere—that the sum available for this budget would have been the same sum provided to the Executive for 2023-24, if they were in place.

I recognise that the Northern Ireland Departments, in the absence of elected Ministers, will face difficult decisions, but it is necessary to deliver a balanced budget. These decisions rest with the Northern Ireland civil service, but I will continue to work with them to protect frontline services in Northern Ireland.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I fully concur with the Secretary of State about the importance of the Executive being restored. The other point he was making was about ensuring that the Budget is balanced. Does he recognise that there is a certain disjoint between the

current guidance that the civil service has and the expectations placed on it in balancing the Budget? They cannot touch the statutory areas, which means that the non-statutory areas are being overly targeted. Also, the Departments are overspending because they cannot live within the budget controls. Unless some action is taken over the remainder of this year, we will see a massive overspend, which will create a bigger hole and a bigger challenge down the line and lead to deeper cuts.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman makes a wise point, and I know he follows this issue closely. We are working closely with the Northern Ireland civil service on this matter. As he alluded to, when the UK Government took over the responsibility overall, we inherited an overspend for 2022-23. A reserve claim of £297 million was provided to balance last year's Budget. Despite projections of an overspend throughout the year and the UK's agreement to the reserve claim, the final budget figures from 2022-23 show a slight underspend of £40 billion, so it came in at £257 million. I know that those big sums of money will still cause great concern over the budgetary issues in Northern Ireland, but it does demonstrate how monitoring rounds and monitoring spending bring about amazing behaviours for budgetary purposes. I would like to think we can work together in this space in the future. However, the one thing I do know—it has been demonstrated time and time again—is that that work would be better done by a locally elected Executive, with Ministers accountable to the people who elected them.

As I mentioned, with agreement from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), flexibility has been granted on the repayment of this reserve claim, which moves the repayment into the next financial year, not this one. Before I conclude, I will briefly run through the Bill clause by clause.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the UK Government still provide additional funding to the Police Service of Northern Ireland to reflect the lethal terrorist threat to which Northern Ireland is still subjected?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Indeed, we do provide that funding. It is to the value of £32 million a year this year and next year for sure, and then the future is the future.

Clauses 1 and 2 authorise the use of resources by Northern Ireland Departments and other specified public bodies, amounting to—I love figures like this—£27,403,000,514 in the year ending 31 March 2024, for the purposes specified in part 2 of schedule 1 and subject to the limits set out in subsections (4) to (7) of clause 2.

Clauses 3 and 4 authorise the Northern Ireland Department of Finance to issue out of the Consolidated Fund for Northern Ireland the sum of £22,790,893,000 for the purposes set out in part 2 of schedule 1.

Clause 5 authorises the temporary borrowing by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance of £11,395,447,000—approximately half the sum covered by clause 3. That is a normal safeguard against the possibility of a temporary deficiency arriving in the Consolidated Fund for Northern Ireland, and any such borrowing is to be repaid by 31 March 2024.

Clause 6 authorises the use of income by Northern Ireland Departments and other specified public bodies from the sources specified in part 2 of the schedule for the purposes specified in part 2 of the schedule in the year ending 31 March 2024.

Clause 7 provides for the authorisations and limits in the Bill to have the same effect as if they were contained in a budget Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It also modifies references in other pieces of legislation to Northern Ireland estimates, which would normally form part of the Assembly's supply process.

Clauses 8 and 9 are self-explanatory and deal with "Interpretation" and "Short title".

Finally, the schedule to the Bill sets out the amount of money authorised for use for each Northern Ireland Department, the purposes for which it can be spent and the other sources of income from which the Departments can draw.

Before I sit down, I express my sincere thanks for the ongoing hard work of the civil servants in Northern Ireland. With this Bill, I am only setting out the available total resource and capital budget for the Northern Ireland Departments of £14.2 billion and £2.2 billion respectively. I make it clear that in the absence of an Executive, it is now the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Departments to make the specific spending decisions to ensure that they live within the Budget limits as set out in the Bill. I recognise that is not an easy task and requires difficult decisions, but people in Northern Ireland rightly expect to see those decisions taken in Stormont, and I wholeheartedly agree with them. However, until a functioning Executive returns, this Bill will allow public services to continue functioning and will help to protect the public finances in Northern Ireland. I therefore commend this Bill to the House.

8.26 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for setting out the measures in the Bill. Northern Ireland Departments are in a challenging position, and this budget will at least give them some certainty to allow public services to remain functioning, but that should not take away from how this budget has been received in Northern Ireland. Civil servants, who have to make decisions based on it, are operating in the most difficult of circumstances. I pay tribute to them, as the Secretary of State did. They should not be in this position.

This Bill will not create new money, but will allow Departments and public bodies in Northern Ireland to spend within the limits the Secretary of State set out in the written ministerial statement in April. It confirmed that the Government will no longer require the £297 million overspend from the 2022-23 Budget to be repaid to the Treasury this year.

Before going into the allocations before us, it is worth reflecting on the situation in Northern Ireland and how power-sharing might be restored. On my recent trips to Northern Ireland, there has been a pervading sense that the Government have allowed things to drift since the celebrations for the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. We have a new agreement with the EU in the Windsor framework, but Stormont has not been restored. Indeed, the main purpose of the framework was supposed to be answering the concerns of the Democratic Unionist party so that Stormont could work again. When we

[Peter Kyle]

passed the previous budget, there was a clear expectation that a new agreement would lead to the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive. Instead, Westminster has had to step in with the Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Act 2023 and, now, this second budget Bill.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Was the hon. Gentleman's attention drawn to a report in *The Daily Telegraph* on Saturday, where a Marks & Spencer senior executive pointed out that some of the issues they were promised would be resolved through the Windsor framework and the green lane and the red lane are far from being resolved?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful for the hon. Member's intervention. He will know my personal view, which is that the outstanding issues relating to the Windsor framework and the protocol could be resolved from within the Executive and the Assembly. However, there are clearly outstanding issues. I hope that the Government will help to resolve them. They have said in various forms that they are willing to engage with different measures from legislation through to other sets of negotiations. I hope that they will happen apace and that the hon. Member and members of his party and all parties in Northern Ireland are as involved as is physically possible so that there can be the engagement that I believe was lacking in previous negotiations.

As an Opposition, we always want to be constructive when it comes to Northern Ireland, and I am grateful for the Secretary of State's acknowledgment of that. We are concerned, though, that the wrong lessons have been learned from the Windsor framework negotiations. On Wednesday 21 June—for the benefit of our friends in *Hansard*, who are working so hard, I refer to volume 734—the Secretary of State said:

"The one thing that I did learn from the Windsor framework negotiations is that confidentiality in modern-day British politics and western politics is key in trying to get anything over the line."—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2023; Vol. 734, c. 779.]

I am not sure that that holds true in the present circumstances.

There is a strong argument that the secrecy of the Windsor framework, after months of secret talks, left it lacking local ownership and local legitimacy. I understand that the Secretary of State is not going to spell out every detail of what the Government are doing, but providing some basic information would reassure Parliament, the public and, above all, people in Northern Ireland and those who represent them here in Westminster and in Stormont. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State confirmed whether he intends to bring forward primary legislation to address the Windsor framework. Is that still on the cards? He has mentioned it several times. I noticed in his answers to recent oral questions that that is still open for debate. It would be really good to know whether the House will be getting primary legislation—it has been requested and he has hinted at it—and when we could expect it. Are the Government instead seeking a renegotiation with the EU?

There is also the question of whether the Irish Government have a part to play in this. I was interested to read that student nurses in Northern Ireland will now

be funded by the Republic. Is the Secretary of State having discussions about other financial contributions in these extremely challenging times?

Another option available to the Secretary of State is calling an election, but I am sure he agrees that it is highly unlikely that that course of action would resolve the current impasse. We do need to know what the way forward will be and what the Secretary of State believes will see Stormont return to active service on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

Returning to the Budget before us, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee inquiry into the funding and delivery of public services has been extremely informative. I join the Secretary of State in thanking those who serve on the Committee for the work they do. The Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), has always said that we should decouple the issues surrounding the protocol from the public finances and restoration of Stormont. The evidence before his inquiry has been illuminating. Even before Stormont collapsed, the inquiry found that long-term pressures on public services were not being addressed.

I also pay tribute to the excellent work of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, which has moved the debate forward on the sustainability of public finances. It is impressive that such a new institution has already become such an authority. In its report on this budget, it says that

"the NI Civil Service believes that Departments may still need to find £800 million in cuts and additional revenues not to overspend again, given other budget pressures."

That is a huge amount of savings to find when Northern Ireland is facing the same challenges as the rest of the country. We should put on the record the views of some of those who have already been most affected by those decisions. In particular, the challenges facing the Department of Education highlight the deficiencies in setting a budget from Westminster in the way we are today and as we have previously.

Following the intervention by the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), I will go into a little more detail on that. I hope that the Secretary of State or Minister of State will respond in winding up. These comments, by the Department of Education permanent secretary, Dr Mark Browne, come directly from an extraordinary press release on the Department's very own website:

"The Department's vision for all children is that they will be happy, learning and succeeding. Delivering on this is particularly challenging in the current budgetary context, especially in terms of addressing the needs of our most disadvantaged children and young people."

In its assessment of the budget, the Department said that the 2023-24 allocations result in a non-ringfenced resource funding gap of £382 million, equivalent to 14.8% of the final budget allocation required for 2023-24. It states:

"Managing resource shortfalls of this magnitude will undoubtedly have a significant and adverse impact on the Department's ability to deliver educational services in 2023-24."

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Member has highlighted an area in which I have serious concerns—the policies being put forward relating to our civil service, our Department of Health and the contracts that are costing not just Northern Ireland but the United Kingdom a fortune. We are tied in by that. The Departments

depend so much upon monitoring round funding during the year to make up some of the shortfall. Our monster Department of Health has swallowed all that, and will continue to do so until we have major reform, not just in Northern Ireland but in the UK too, because the same contracts apply all over.

Peter Kyle: The hon. Gentleman highlights the chronic need for investment and reform in Northern Ireland. One in four people in Northern Ireland is on an NHS treatment waiting list. We have already examined in some detail the challenges in the education system. We really need to get things moving and modernised in Northern Ireland. In my view, that should come from a partnership between the Westminster Government and Stormont. We should all be working together to focus on the big issues, because people's needs depend on it. That is why we must urgently get over the hurdles to restoring Stormont as quickly as we can, to focus on those primary issues, which are also the primary concerns of residents across Northern Ireland that Members here tonight represent.

To return to the quote from the Department, in practice that means the ending of a wide range of schemes meant to benefit children. So far, that has included Engage, Healthy Happy Minds, the school holiday food grant scheme and many more. However, significantly, a range of early years programmes will continue—thank goodness. That is after the Department produced an analysis of the impact that ending them would have on people's lives. In the words of Dr Browne:

"In considering the scale and cumulative impact of the proposed cuts, which represent a major change to long standing Ministerial programmes and policies, I am of the view that such a decision should be taken by a Minister, not a Permanent Secretary."

In effect, that is a senior civil servant saying that it might not be possible to work within the budget without a Minister taking decisions. That is not just an issue for the Department of Education. A recent report from BBC Northern Ireland said:

"DfI officials believe they lack the legal authority to take measures necessary to balance their budget."

I will not take up much more time because I want to allow voices from Northern Ireland to have their say on what the Budget means for them and the residents they represent. The Minister needs to be clear with the House whether we will need more legislation to provide clarity on the decisions being made as a result of this budget. We will not oppose the budget, as Departments have been working to its allocations for months already, but the best solution remains the restoration of Stormont, so that local representatives can get on with the budget and political accountability there. I urge Government to get on with the measures that would make that a reality.

8.38 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): Members will be aware of my keen interest in all things the Union. In truth, I had intended not to speak but to come, listen and learn from colleagues from across the House who in many ways are much more closely attached to these issues than me.

I will start, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State did, by thanking all those concerned for the amount of time and effort they have put into resolving these issues. They are tricky issues that have vexed minds finer

than my own for many years in many different ways. In particular, in recent months I have noticed how much effort the Government have put into trying to resolve things. The Secretary of State has taken a very close personal interest in these matters, as has the Prime Minister through the efforts on the Windsor framework. I recognise and acknowledge that, as well as the involvement and effort of Opposition Members in the negotiations and ongoing discussions.

I want to tiptoe carefully into this debate by asking some questions around the context, in particular picking up on a couple of comments the Secretary of State made from the Dispatch Box. On the introduction of the Barnett formula to the discussion, while I understand the potential attraction of that kind of settlement, from a Welsh perspective I urge caution. I would not by any means describe the Barnett formula as a settled matter in Wales. I would urge caution about a move to a needs-based formula. In Wales, we have an economy—I say that word almost in quotation marks—that is largely public sector dominated. It is not a functioning economy in the way that we might think is vital, with the role of the private sector in driving, growing and sustaining the wider community, so the provisions are questionable.

The first point I want to speak to relates to institutions. The Secretary of State mentioned good governance and, several times, made points about the democratically elected representatives in Northern Ireland. That is really important, because we have elected Members in Northern Ireland, both in this place and in Stormont. As I understand it—I am happy to be corrected by any Member here—those Members have acted within the rules of that institution. The fact that Stormont is not sitting is a technique that has been used by others in previous years. It is not new; it is not original. It is a function of the arrangements we have in place.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): My grandmother once told me that two wrongs do not make a right. Is the hon. Gentleman making the argument that just because Sinn Féin brought the Executive down for three and a half years, it is okay for the Democratic Unionist party to do the same?

Robin Millar: I am not sure how the hon. Gentleman got there from what I said, but that is not where I am going. That is absolutely not where I am going. I simply made the observation that they had done it and that others were doing it, and that validated the existence of a mechanism in place which people have used. That is all I said.

The point I would make, though, is that if there is a democratically elected body and the mechanisms within that institution are being used, how is that not upholding the institution in place? If that is the case—the function of the institution and the rules that underpin it are being upheld—what is the good governance that the Secretary of State is seeking? Is he seeking something else? Is he seeking something outside the rules that are in place to uphold that institution?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Member and my friend for giving way, and for his interest in the Union. He is making a very important point. For some, it is convenient at times to talk up the need for cross-community consensus and to talk about the rules. It is less convenient for them at other times, when the rules are followed and people play by the rules. When things

[Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson]

happen that undermine that cross-community consensus, then unfortunately the rules mean that our institutions do not work to the extent that we would like them to. Therefore, rather than howling at the moon, is it not better that we fix the problem and restore the consensus?

Robin Millar: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. That is where I am heading with my next point.

As I said, I tiptoed into this. I am very conscious that others are much closer to these issues than myself. I offer my comments because I think, from the little I understand, these are important points of context for what is happening and what we are seeing.

Finally, the Secretary of State has made the astute point that money alone cannot solve this. I think it was the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) who said that some extra £7 billion has been put into Northern Ireland. Somewhere along the line, the United Kingdom has moved from an understanding of a covenant among the different parts to one of a contract; we have become very transactional in our understanding of things. I would just make the observation that that does not fix things. It does not fix the relationship.

At the heart of the issue, as I understand it—the Minister may comment on this point in his summing up, if he sees fit—is a relationship and a covenant, not a contract. It is about identity and a place within the Union, as expressed through trading relationships. We have been brought to a point at which Stormont has not been sitting, which is why we have this item of business before us today. I will not keep the House any longer; I thank hon. Members for their forbearance in listening to my questions.

8.45 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): May I begin by expressing my personal disappointment that once again we are here passing measures that should rightly be passed in Stormont? I will add a significant caveat: I had hoped that we might be able to get through today's proceedings without some of the finger-wagging homilies that we have heard in the past from Members on the Government Benches about the need for Northern Ireland to get its public finances in order, as if the political position in which Northern Ireland finds itself had absolutely nothing to do with the choices of this Government or their predecessors. Some difficult political choices are absent from the measures that we are set to move on with today. The very reason that we are here having to pass them is the political chaos that the choices of this Government and previous Governments have inflicted on the body politic in Northern Ireland over Brexit, and through a Brexit that is still clearly not done.

The first thing to note about the Bill is that, although it might be called a budget Bill, it is quite clearly no budget in any meaningful sense. At any level of government, local or national, a budget is or should be a statement of the political and policy priorities of that government reflected in the allocation of resources. Instead, what we have here is a series of spending limits, absent any kind of reflection of current political priorities or choices that might be made. It is a kind of financial salami-slicing in the shape of the ghosts of ministerial policy decisions past.

In our debates on the Northern Ireland (Interim Arrangements) Act 2023, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson)—I hope I am quoting him substantially accurately—said that the return of an Executive would not remove the budget challenges that are currently being faced in Northern Ireland. That much is certainly true, but it is also true that in the absence of clear political choices it becomes much harder to meet those budget challenges through proactive, positive decision making—about cost-saving measures, yes, but also about potential cross-cutting efficiencies and, fundamentally, about what is to be valued and protected above all else when it comes to spending in the public realm.

That heaps the pressure unfairly on public sector management, civil servants and those on the frontline, but, as ever, those who stand to lose out the most are those who are most dependent on the public services facing those cuts: predominantly those who are least well-off and have the least opportunity to influence the political debate in Northern Ireland.

I think it fair to say that the dismay at some of the outcomes of the budget process across Northern Ireland is palpable. The trade union Unite has highlighted that cuts to the Department for Infrastructure threaten not just health, but public safety. The Northern Ireland Construction Group has warned that the cuts will affect every sector, citizen and visitor to Northern Ireland and even put people at risk of serious harm. The charity Children in Northern Ireland has warned that the cuts threaten to push community groups and charities

“to the brink of collapse”.

A joint report by Ulster University, Newcastle University, Queen's University and Stranmillis University College has warned of an “unremittingly bleak” outlook for young people and education as a result of these measures, warning that they “are disproportionately impacting” the most disadvantaged children and young people in our communities. The report speaks of

“far-reaching and serious consequences of the cuts to the education budget”,

pointing out the disproportionate effect that the cuts have on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and stating that

“those children who are most disadvantaged will most acutely feel the pain of this budget laid down by the Secretary of State”.

It concludes that

“the cuts executed will have a devastating impact on those children most vulnerable and furthest from opportunity”.

I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) is no longer in her place but, in her intervention on the Secretary of State, she asked how much additional resource currently comes from the UK Government to support policing in Northern Ireland. That figure is £32 million—a figure that I am pleased to say accords exactly with the figure given to me by the Secretary of State in answer to my question on the PSNI at Northern Ireland questions a few weeks ago. However, that £32 million pales into near insignificance in the context of the £141 million budget gap facing the PSNI. The chief constable has said that the budget gap can be met only by further reducing officer numbers, at a time when police officer numbers in the PSNI are at their lowest since 1978 and the PSNI is already some 1,000 officers below the recommended establishment

figure from the beginning of the force's life. Real consequences arise from this situation, not only for public services and the social settlement but for the security that people can expect in their community and, of course, for the broader security situation, which is still rated as severe by the Government's security agencies.

I could go through any number of budget lines that are affected, but I do not think that would necessarily do us a huge amount of good at this stage, so I will begin to draw my remarks to a conclusion by referring to the September 2020 report published by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on the Department of Finance's preparation for Northern Ireland's 2019-20 budget. The report set out a number of findings and recommendations on the Department's failure to comply with its own equality scheme commitments. In doing so, it outlined some key aspects of the Secretary of State's role in the budget process.

Although the Secretary of State is not a designated public authority for the purposes of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, his Department and the Department of Finance are. The report concluded:

"the Budget for Northern Ireland...is a policy and within scope of the Department's equality scheme arrangements and commitments..."

The decision maker on the policy was, on this occasion, the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State was responsible for not only deciding upon the Budget, but also discharging the statutory duties in Section 75 in relation to the Department's functions, as well as for all the other government departments."

Although the findings of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland are clear that the Department of Finance was a focus of its investigations, the Secretary of State was and remains responsible not only for deciding the budget but for discharging the equality duties set out in section 75.

Will the Secretary of State, or the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), in his summing up, elucidate on what he understands his section 75 duties to be? How can he demonstrate in this process that he has complied with those duties? Does he have any plans, even at this stage, to produce and consult on an equality assessment of the overall budget measures before us today?

I conclude on a measure of agreement, as the Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State and I can all agree that the best people to take decisions of this kind are those who have been directly elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly. I well understand the reasons we are here now. I have certainly never been shy about offering my advice to this Government and their predecessors on how they might look to solve some of the self-inflicted difficulties they have created over Brexit. The Government have unaccountably shown a marked reluctance to take up my advice, no matter how well meant, but, given that the Windsor framework has clearly not landed as was hoped, I sincerely urge the Secretary of State and his ministerial team to redouble their efforts to bring about a political environment in which it might be possible to restore Stormont, and therefore restore local political decision making and accountability.

8.54 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): As the Secretary of State has said, tonight's debate and the Bill are simply to allocate money, which we have already decided

on in previous debates, to various Departments. Although I made a promise to the Minister of State when we discussed this on Thursday that we would try to stick to the debate on the budget and try not to wander into the Windsor framework, Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol, the issue of—

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): Another promise broken.

Sammy Wilson: The promise actually was broken by the Secretary of State. It was a two-sided promise: that would not be raised by Ministers, who would be sensitive to the issue, knowing what our answer to these issues are and, in turn, we would stick to the budget debate. That promise has not been kept, so it would be remiss of me not to make it clear, as has been made clear by my party leader in an intervention, that we want to see the Executive up and running, but there are rules for the working of the Executive. There are important safeguards for the Executive to work: the views of both communities have to be respected, accepted and reflected in the decisions made in the Executive and in the decisions made by the Executive.

As things stand, with the protocol and the framework, there will still be a requirement for foreign law to be imposed in Northern Ireland and for Ministers of a Unionist disposition to operate that system—a system that the Government, even in the Windsor framework discussions, indicated would lead to divergence between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. A paltry safeguard of the Stormont brake was put in but, even if it worked, it still would not stop Northern Ireland becoming further away from the rest of the UK because of decisions made in this House about laws that would affect the United Kingdom, excluding Northern Ireland.

I have to say to the Secretary of State that, while that situation pertains, he cannot ignore the requirements of the law in Northern Ireland. The views of both communities must be reflected, accepted and implemented in the Executive and the Assembly. If that does not happen, they cannot function because we do not have the basis for agreement and for decisions being made.

It is debatable, of course, but we can talk about the Executive, up and running, being able to decide and resolve some of the issues that have been talked about here today. As I go through my speech, I point out that the Executive, its implementation and existence is not essential to deal with some of the fundamental issues that have given rise to the budget problems that Northern Ireland is facing.

I wish to make two points, the first of which is about the impact of the budget on services in Northern Ireland. Like the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), I do not want to go through every Department but, as this has been raised by two or three speakers already, one of the starkest indications of the budget problem we have in Northern Ireland is to be found in education. There will be a 2.8% reduction in education spending in Northern Ireland, while in England there will be a 6.5% increase. That will affect the aggregated schools budget: the amount of money that goes to individual schools. It will particularly affect youngsters with special educational needs because, of course, as has been said, the easiest things to cut are things like classroom assistants. Of course, spending on classroom

[Sammy Wilson]

assistants and support for people with special educational needs is to be cut by 50%. There are already 11,000 children diagnosed with special educational needs who will be affected, and there is a waiting list of 400 children who have not even been placed, so we can see the ongoing problem and the problems we will build up over the years because of the cuts in the education budget. I could also talk about aspects of the education budget that are designed to help youngsters from deprived backgrounds, such as measures on school meals that were introduced by the Minister from my party. They will have to be reduced as well, which again tends to affect children from the most disadvantaged areas.

Let us take the other example, which has also been mentioned. I served for some time on the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Policing is important for any community, and it is particularly important in Northern Ireland because of the ongoing terrorist threat, the problem of paramilitaries and the terror gangs and criminal gangs associated with them, and the impact that has on communities. New Decade, New Approach made a commitment to have 7,500 officers, yet the figure is set to fall to about 5,700 officers. In the next two years, 850 officers are going to retire. The money is available to recruit only 204, so the situation will get worse and worse in terms of police officer numbers, which will fall below the commitment made on how many are required in Northern Ireland.

Chris Heaton-Harris: We have just had a debate about making sure that we are factually correct in this place. I am quite sure that what the right hon. Gentleman is saying is absolutely factually correct. However, does he not recognise that the commitment to increase police numbers to 7,500 that he is talking about was a commitment by the Executive? Would the choices that he has outlined not be better served by an Executive functioning and an Assembly scrutinising?

Sammy Wilson: I know that the Secretary of State was not personally responsible, but he cannot wash his hands of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which was between the parties in Northern Ireland and the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith). The Executive did not pull this out of the air and say, “We’re going to do this”; it was part of the agreement that was made. Indeed, I have heard Ministers in this place saying time and again, “You’ve got to get back to the New Decade, New Approach promises and the commitments that were made,” yet this is one of those very commitments, and it is one that will not be met because the money is not there.

The argument that we have heard tonight is: “Well, that’s partly the responsibility of the Executive. If the Executive were up and running, then you could spend the money better.” I have no difficulty with that. Only a fool would say there were no savings to be made in a resource budget of £14 billion, or that it could not be spent better. Anybody who looks at their own personal budget will find ways of saving money and allocating it better to meet their priorities, so of course the potential is there. Indeed, I know from my time in the Executive that we were able to find 3% savings across Departments, and I am not against what the Minister said—that there are ways we could spend money better.

We have dodged reforms over the years because some of them require difficult decisions. That is the responsibility of the Executive, if they were up and running. I could bore the House with lots of examples, but in the past our Ministers have shown how we have used money in order to use resources better. Indeed, we have even looked at co-operation with the Republic of Ireland, when it has come to spending money, and at how we could share resources to deal with those kinds of issues and make better use of money.

Our party believes in low taxation and the proper use of the public resources we have, so we are not going to ignore that. But the fact of the matter is that the Executive are not up and running. Even if they were up and running, the issues and the problems of public spending in Northern Ireland are so big that the Executive would struggle to make some of the necessary reforms. Do not forget some of those reforms require money to be spent to make the reforms, so there is a vicious circle.

The Budget is inadequate—that is the first thing we need to look at. The holes in the Budget are so big and the issues around it so difficult that even if we had a performing Executive tomorrow, they would not be able to get past those issues. The building of public sector housing has fallen by 25% because of capital costs.

There are also difficulties, when it comes to the Executive, of pure caution. I know the Minister will talk about how much money has been given to Northern Ireland, but do not forget that we have given back £471 million in financial transactions capital, because the rules tied around that required a degree of innovation by civil servants and the Northern Ireland Office that was not always possible. The main outlet for it was housing, and there is only so much that it could absorb. So when it comes to taking money off the Executive, let us not forget that where money could not be spent, it was returned to the Exchequer. Sometimes it was frustrating to find that money had been given that could not be spent because we were not being innovative enough.

That brings me to the second issue. I know the Minister will say how much money is given to Northern Ireland and how some constituents in the south of England would envy the amount of money that comes to Northern Ireland, but there is a mechanism for allocating money within the United Kingdom. At present, the Barnett mechanism works by simply giving Northern Ireland a percentage—3%. If there are Barnett consequential for Government spending for the whole of the United Kingdom, we get 3%.

However, it was always recognised that across the United Kingdom the circumstances are different. It was first raised in Wales and, as has been pointed out, there is a greater need in some parts of the United Kingdom, because of a whole lot of factors that I will go into in a minute, and therefore the 3% given on a per head basis is not adequate. It needs to be topped up on a well-established needs basis. Because of needs in Northern Ireland, it was reckoned that for every £100 spent in England, £125 would need to be spent in Northern Ireland. In other words, it was a 25% uplift.

For example, if the Barnett formula showed that Northern Ireland should get 3%, on the basis that Northern Ireland has 3% of the UK population, then there should be a 25% addition—a 0.75% addition to the 3%—to that. That has not been happening. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council has worked out that had that additional

needs element been put in this year, then we would have had another £323 million. Incidentally, that would have plugged the gap in public spending.

If that were happening right across the United Kingdom and people were saying that they were not applying it in Scotland or Wales, then, I suppose, those in Northern Ireland would have no cause for complaint. The truth of the matter is that it is being applied in every other part of the United Kingdom, apart from in Northern Ireland. This is the only budget that is being brought forward where the need is recognised but not reflected in the moneys allocated.

The Secretary of State has argued that if the Assembly were up and running, we could make the case, but we do not need to make the case; it has already been agreed that the formula for Northern Ireland should be another £25 on top of every £100 spent in England. We do not need to fight over the definition of need, because it has already been established. The Holtham Commission made that quite clear. I take the point that was made earlier: I do not want Northern Ireland to become some sort of public sector-dominated economy, which makes us totally reliant. I want to see Northern Ireland becoming self-reliant. I want to see a growing economy; an economy that is generating taxes, income and revenue, and that does not need to be reliant on having a fight with the Treasury every year about the budget and whether we are getting the proper Barnett consequentials.

The definition of need is already well established. It is based on demographic figures—the number of people—and deprivation and cost measures, such as the under-16 dependency ratio, the retired persons dependency ratio, the percentage of population claiming income-related benefits, the percentage of population with long-term illness, the proportion of people outside settlements of 10,000 people, and so on and so forth. We do not need to fight about how much Northern Ireland is entitled to. We do not need to fight about the measure that determines that need. All we need is a decision that the need should be reflected in the budget allocation in Northern Ireland, just as it is in Scotland and Wales.

The Secretary of State argues that, if the Executive were up and running, we could make those arguments, but the arguments are made. The question is how long do we have to wait for what happens in other parts of the United Kingdom to be applied to Northern Ireland.

Robin Millar: I do not want to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman's flow, because I am fascinated by his argument. The point I made was that in Wales, for example, it is £1.20 for every £1 spent in England. However, as much as we are told by the Welsh Government that there is an older and sicker population in Wales, it does not account for the fact that, in terms of education, we have tumbled down the Pisa ratings. The point that I was making was that it is not just about the quantum. Has the right hon. Gentleman any suggestions as to how that money might be spent more effectively in order to achieve the better outcomes?

Sammy Wilson: I think the point that I made was an indication of that. It is not just about getting money so that we can spend it willy-nilly and not care about how it is spent. It must be spent in the best way possible. If we take education in Northern Ireland, for example, we have five different sectors, and in some cases a surplus

of desks and, therefore, unnecessary schools that could be closed, amalgamated or whatever. The irony of this—this is where I take issue with some of the decisions by the Northern Ireland Executive—is that one of the last acts that the Assembly undertook was that, despite the surplus of places in existing schools in Northern Ireland, special provision had to be given to opening new schools that had “Integrated” above the door. This was despite the fact that there are stacks of schools that do not have “Integrated” above the door, but that are more integrated than some integrated schools. That will result in additional pressures on the education budget. I am not so sure that some of the decisions made by the Executive on how the money is spent are always the best.

There is one in the area of education and in the area of health as well. I know I am going to incur the ire of some of my own colleagues, and maybe some other hon. Members, by saying this, but in Belfast we have four major hospitals. Four major hospitals for a city of—what? Some 300,000 people? Are there really not better ways of spending that money to ensure proper health provision? Yet we spend it—[*Interruption.*] And that is exactly the debate that has to be had.

Claire Hanna: Does the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that the Bengoa report outlined how we could tackle that reform and get ourselves to a more sustainable delivery, but that the Assembly has been collapsed for, I think, four of the six years since that that report was delivered, and that only way we can deliver those reforms, necessary as many of them may be, is in a restored Executive?

Sammy Wilson: That is the whole point. Ministers have had the Bengoa report, as the hon. Lady says, for years. They have never acted on it. Indeed, some of the health reforms that were acted on and some of the politically difficult changes that were made in Health were made by a DUP Minister. We have given the lead on trying to deal with some of the spending issues. However, even with those savings, there are still the issues of fairness, of whether the Budget is sustainable, and of why we are not implementing in Northern Ireland the kind of budget reallocations that are implemented in other parts of the United Kingdom.

We will find the issues arising from this budget coming back to the Floor of this House time and again, because Departments are not going to be able to work within the existing budgets. Furthermore, since the Minister indicates that the Barnett consequentials that should be coming through will not come through this year because of the overspend in previous years, when it comes to the payment of nurses, teachers and so on, there will be greater pressures on the budgets of various Departments across Northern Ireland. I do not know whether those are reflected in this budget. That is why it must be accepted that, until the Government are prepared to look at measures that create the grounds for the formation of the Executive again, this issue will rest with the Secretary of State and he will have to take responsibility for it.

9.17 pm

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I think we are really through the looking-glass now. It is great to hear real unity from those on these Benches about the problems that exist in Northern Ireland's public sector and the

[Colum Eastwood]

budgetary difficulties that we have. It would be a lot better if members of our political parties were saying it in a different Chamber that has responsibility for bringing in budgets for the Departments of Northern Ireland, for dealing with the health service, the education system, the police service and all those other areas of public policy that we need to deal with as a matter of urgency—but I will let that one hang.

It is interesting to listen to the Secretary of State, because he has let the cat out of the bag. It is absolutely clear that this Budget is a tactic to put pressure on the DUP, but actually he has swung, missed the DUP and instead hit the most vulnerable people in our society. Is it the responsibility of a child with special educational needs and disabilities in a school to get the DUP to go back to work? Is it the responsibility of an elderly patient waiting for a hip replacement—remember, one in four people in Northern Ireland are on hospital waiting lists—to get the Executive back up and running in Northern Ireland? No, it is not. This is a callous, cack-handed attempt at political positioning and it clearly is not working.

Not that long ago, I brought the Secretary of State to watch a football match in Derry. We did not get to watch the whole match because it was interrupted by a bomb scare, but he listened to me—he had no choice, because he was sitting right beside me for most of the match—talking about the difficulties in the city and the need for proper investment in drug and alcohol recovery. He was sitting in the Ryan McBride Brandywell stadium. Ryan McBride was a wonderful captain of Derry City who sadly died far too young. There is a foundation in his name—the Ryan McBride Foundation—which does fantastic cross-community work with schoolkids in all types of schools right across Derry and Strabane, but it has had its funding to deliver those projects cut.

We are nearly at the point where the Ryan McBride Foundation will not be able to exist if it does not get replacement funding. That is one thing that has resulted from cuts being made to our budgets. The Foyle cup will see thousands of young people coming to Derry next week to play football—people from all around the world—but it is now under pressure because of cuts from these decisions.

We are actually talking about cutting funding for university places. We should be trying to expand university places in Northern Ireland. I hear from the Secretary of State and everybody else that skills are the No. 1 issue for turning the economy around, but we are talking about cutting away at that as well. We are cutting Invest Northern Ireland—the people who are tasked with bringing jobs to regions of Northern Ireland.

Others, including the shadow Secretary of State, talked eloquently about the issues in our Education Department. We have cut the holiday hunger payment for the most vulnerable kids in our society—that is what we are doing. It is absolutely shameful. A number of weeks ago, I went to see Bunscoil Cholmcille, a school in my constituency. It is a great Irish-medium primary school. Those kids are being taught in huts with holes in the walls and damp in the cupboards—the place is falling apart. It will have its 40th anniversary next year. It is a wonderful school doing great work in our community, but we are teaching kids in huts that are falling apart,

and rain is getting through the roof. We cannot even pay our teachers or classroom assistants the wages that they should be entitled to.

We have already talked about the massive issues in the PSNI, and although we are told that there is £32 million extra for it, there is a massive hole in that budget. A police officer was nearly killed a number of months ago because people in Northern Ireland are trying to kill police officers, and they would if they could get away with it. And we are telling them: “You have to find cuts in that budget as well.” The implementation of the domestic abuse, stalking and people-trafficking legislation cannot get done because of a lack of funding.

Our community sector is being absolutely decimated. Community groups, particularly in the most difficult and disadvantaged areas of Northern Ireland, have stepped into the void during decades of difficult times. They are stepping into the void where Departments are not dealing with the issues that they have to deal with, but we are going to decimate those groups as well.

We have talked about health. I hear all the time about transformation in health and the waiting lists that we have. We cannot do anything about those if we do not put money in up front. Yes, we absolutely have to take tough decisions, but health needs to be properly funded and resourced so that we can do that.

All the while, there is €500 million in the shared island unit to fund projects in Northern Ireland. The Irish Government are investing in Northern Ireland. Only two or three weeks ago, I was able to secure £38 million to expand the university at Magee in Derry. We have seen support from the Irish Government for the Narrow Water bridge. And lo and behold, the Department of Health in Dublin is funding 250 nursing and midwifery places at a cost of €10 million. That is only the start of the investment that the Irish Government are making in Northern Ireland.

Maybe we need to think about that. We do not even sit in Dáil Éireann and we are able to bring that kind of money into our communities in Northern Ireland. Imagine the impact that we would have if 20% of Teachtaí Dála in Dáil Éireann came from Northern Ireland. [Interruption.] I think some people sitting not too far away from me have done an awful lot for the cause of Irish unity, and I am very grateful to them for it.

We hear a lot about the Barnett formula, and it is useful that we discuss how the funding envelope is decided, but it is maybe also worth considering why we need so much underpinning from the British Government. Has the economic unit of Northern Ireland ever really worked to its full potential? I would argue that it has not. I think that is a discussion we will have in the coming years, and I look forward to having it in a respectful manner.

If the Secretary of State is serious about getting the DUP to go back to work in Stormont, I will be with him in that endeavour, but it is long past time that a time limit was put on this nonsense. Have the discussions, have the debates, work with the Government—I am all for all of that—but we need to be back in government, dealing with the people’s problems and the people’s concerns. If that does not happen, we cannot have this kind of direct rule by the back door, because the next step in that—people should listen to this—has to be greater involvement of the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland.

9.26 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I share the disappointment that we are here today expressed by the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), and the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson). We should not have to be here discussing this, although I appreciate that we have already made a decision about the budget and that this was absolutely necessary to enable Departments to spend.

I, too, pay tribute to the civil servants who are having to make very political decisions while labouring—I hope—under Managing Public Money and making sure that they are making proper financial decisions. Nevertheless, every decision they make on a budget of this nature will cause political repercussions. They have been put in an unenviable position.

I rise to speak about a specific element of this budget. I wrote to the Minister about this, so I hope that when he winds up, the Minister of State will address the matter directly. The Northern Ireland Audit Office is critical: with no Assembly sitting and no Executive, it is the only body able to scrutinise spending by public bodies in Northern Ireland; it audits 150 public bodies. Of course, without the Assembly sitting there is no Public Accounts Committee in Northern Ireland, so the NIAO is the only body that is able to do that work. It is critical that it does so.

We all know the importance of the National Audit Office here in the United Kingdom. It is a much bigger body, and as the Secretary of State, a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, knows, it does invaluable work, not only training Ministers to manage budgets but making sure on behalf of the British taxpayer, through Parliament, that those budgets are spent properly. Independent of the Executive and appointed independently of the Executive, the Comptroller and Auditor General has the powers to investigate, without fear or favour, every area of public spending in England and parts of the United Kingdom.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office is a much smaller operation, ably headed up by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, Dorinnia Carville. She, like the UK Comptroller and Auditor General is totally independent of Ministers, of Government Departments and of all the public bodies that her office audits. The NIAO has 115 staff—it is a much smaller version of the UK NAO, which has over 950 staff—and an annual budget in the region of £9 million, so it is very small in the context of this budget. About 0.06% of the block grant goes to the Northern Ireland Audit Office, but as the Secretary of State knows, it has a significant impact.

The amount of money saved by the national audit bodies is significant in the grand scheme of things, so it is disappointing to me that the budget of the Northern Ireland Audit Office has been reduced by £515,000. I think that will store up problems for the future. Very disappointingly—I am particularly disappointed in the Secretary of State on this point—that reduction was made without any meaningful conversation or agreement with the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, which is a required position. That amount of money will have a substantial impact on the ability of the Northern Ireland Audit Office to deliver its work, and with the only scrutiny that is going on in Northern Ireland being through that audit office, it is really important that that work takes place.

I also worry greatly that if the Northern Ireland Audit Office is not able to do its work, the pressure on the UK Public Accounts Committee—which I have the privilege of chairing—will be immense. We have already had to examine the implementation of the energy support grant, which came directly through the then Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and was implemented in Northern Ireland through that route. Unusually, we found ourselves scrutinising direct spending in Northern Ireland. I was very grateful to the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna), who was able to guest on our Committee—we felt very strongly that we needed at least a voice from Northern Ireland on the Committee to explain what the impact was there—but neither myself nor any members of the Public Accounts Committee desire to have a regular role in scrutinising the work and affairs of public bodies and Departments in Northern Ireland. That is rightfully the role of the Public Accounts Committee of Northern Ireland, which we hope will be up and running again, as we hope that the Assembly and the Executive will be up and running again.

I am concerned that the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland had no engagement with the Secretary of State or the Northern Ireland Office when arriving at the Budget. Only a couple of weeks ago, she told the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee that her only conversation with the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Office was via the Department of Finance, and she only learned of her budget on its publication. She had modelled various options and put them forward to the Northern Ireland Department of Finance, but when they were in turn put forward to the Secretary of State, he put forward three options, none of which reflected what she had modelled. There had been no engagement with the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

That is a serious constitutional issue—in the middle of a much bigger constitutional issue, yes, but nevertheless it is very important. If we cannot have a strong and independent Comptroller and Auditor General with their own national audit body, properly funded and supported, that is a real concern, but the fact that the Northern Ireland Audit Office's funding was not properly discussed with it is a really serious matter. It is through this Parliament and the Public Accounts Commission that we decide on the resources that are given to the United Kingdom's National Audit Office. It is not at all appropriate that an Executive should control or direct an audit institution's access to resources. I cannot get my head around why that could have happened, because it is absolutely vital that it does not. I hope the Minister will directly address that point.

I will finish by underlining the problems that can arise when audit gets weak. The Public Accounts Committee, which I chair, has looked repeatedly at the challenge of local government audit in England. We have seen a dearth of public auditors, which has contributed to late audit opinions: very many councils now have not had audit opinions, not just for one year but for two. That has left councillors, council tax payers, and certain officers of those councils blind as to the decisions they are making. A number of councils have serious financial problems, and for some, that is partly because of this issue. In the past, strong local audit in local government has helped to keep councils honest, straight and true. I have great respect for local councils and councillors—

[*Dame Meg Hillier*]

I myself was a councillor before entering this place—but we have seen a real, direct impact of that weakness in audit among English councils, and we are seeing that creeping tendency with hospitals in England, too.

We fiddle with this issue at our peril, and in the grand scheme of things, half a million pounds is a lot of money. The Northern Ireland Audit Office will not be able to carry out its work without that money, so I hope the Minister will address that point directly in his response. Perhaps he will even commit to going away and looking at what the impact will be. Could he or the Secretary of State please commit to having a face-to-face conversation with the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland?

9.34 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (*Dame Meg Hillier*) because, in fairness, she has added a new and useful level to the debate. Hers was a very worthwhile contribution, so I thank her for participating and hope that she shows a renewed and continued vigorous interest in the issues of Northern Ireland.

There have been a number of very useful contributions so far in this debate, if we set aside that from the honourable Healy-Rae from Foyle—the hon. Member for Foyle (*Colum Eastwood*). We enjoy the hon. Member oscillating from a year and a half ago, when he was spending his time cajoling, provoking, ridiculing and mocking my leader and my party at a time when we were raising serious issues, to today, when he is poking, prodding, encouraging and saying, “Just get back to work”, again ignoring serious issues and not recognising the sincerity with which we have sought to highlight and the aspiration to address the issues that are frustrating the proper operation of devolution.

We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (*Sammy Wilson*), who talked about the imbalance between what was attempted to address the deficiency in democratic accountability on issues agreed in Europe and the lack of provision and the danger associated with divergence on Bills brought forward through this place. This week and last, for example, the Postal Packets (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2023 has been but one issue that jars entirely with what the Prime Minister said when the Windsor Framework was published.

We can see clearly how that will treat parcels coming to and from Northern Ireland as foreign parcels, and we can see clearly how it up-ends the commitments given to the people of Northern Ireland during the Windsor framework process—lest we forget—when the majority of parties in Northern Ireland said that there were no problems with the withdrawal agreement and that it should be rigorously implemented on the people of Northern Ireland. When the Windsor framework was published, they said it was a wonderful solution, yet here we are even today, and we can see that the issues left unresolved will continue to plague and cause difficulty for the shared aspiration of restoring devolution. I say that at the outset, because it is important to consider again the context of why we are considering this Bill.

When we have debates such as this, Members will hear criticism, and I will not shy away from that. From my perspective, touching on the principle of this Bill and the reason why we are here today, the Northern Ireland Office has not done enough, the Government have not given enough and the people have had just about enough. When I say that they have not done enough, we should listen to the hon. Member for Gordon (*Richard Thomson*). He and I do not share the same political perspective on these things, but he highlights accurately that here we are debating a Bill that has not had any pre-legislative scrutiny and that has not been before the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

We are implementing and allocating resource to a budget that has not been section 75 screened, and it is having huge and undetermined consequences for the public sector in Northern Ireland and the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. Even if Members are willing, and I am not, to forget about them, it is affecting the ability of our Government Departments to fulfil their statutory functions—to educate children, to care for the elderly, to heal the sick. It is not me saying that, but every permanent secretary who has sought to engage with the Northern Ireland Office and has highlighted how difficult this process would be.

When the Children’s Law Centre, in the most non-party political way possible, writes to me and every other Member of Parliament to highlight just how deficient this process has been, it is amazing to see in the explanatory notes that the Bill is being rushed through because it is urgent. The written ministerial statement was issued on 27 April, and yet there has been nothing in between, knowing that the allocation on 27 April was not sufficient, and knowing at the time that permanent secretaries were saying they could provide their statutory and core functions, never mind extras such as extended schools or support for the most vulnerable members of our society. Let us not forget that that was a choice that the Northern Ireland Office made.

The explanatory notes say that there was no pre-legislative scrutiny, no consultation, and no equalities screening because the Bill had to be rushed, but when will Committee stage be? We do not know. Such a rush, but the Committee has not been scheduled. We hear that we are getting to the stage when things are becoming political. We also hear that there will need to be another Northern Ireland Bill—a Bill that gives the Secretary of State the ability to make decisions on behalf of permanent secretaries.

For the last two months, since the written ministerial statement about the allocation, there has been nothing. There has been no consultation on or scrutiny of the Bill, because it has to be rushed, but we do not know when its remaining stages will be. We now hear that there is need for a third Bill—by the way, a Bill specifically to provide the powers that the Northern Ireland civil service asked for, but that the Secretary of State chose not to include, in the Northern Ireland Budget Bill that received Royal Assent on 8 February. The Northern Ireland civil service provided draft provisions to the Northern Ireland Office, which refused to advance them. Now we hear that there is need of a third Bill, but we all know that there are very few weeks of parliamentary time left before this Session concludes. There will be recess in the summer. There are a couple of sitting

weeks in September, but there are precious few weeks left. The Government are playing at this, and the NIO has not given enough.

I remember the debates that we had back in January about the Northern Ireland Budget Bill, and I remember the Minister of State responding, “Northern Ireland gets £1.20 where my constituents get just £1.” I remember crying out in the wilderness back in January about the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, and the difference between what we are allocated and what we need. The only difference now is that more people seem to engage with that argument. The Fiscal Council has revised downwards its figure of how much spending Northern Ireland needs to England’s £1, from £1.28 to £1.24. Year on year, financial cycle after financial cycle, there is a deficit in the resources that we get. There is a compounding negative impact on the ability to deliver public services in Northern Ireland.

New Decade, New Approach was mentioned. That, and some of the industrial relation issues that arose at the time, were about pay parity. Pay for public sector workers in Northern Ireland was not keeping up with that for their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. Parity was achieved in 2020, yet the rates in Northern Ireland are now growing ever faster apart from those in England, Scotland and Wales.

Chris Heaton-Harris *indicated dissent.*

Gavin Robinson: The Secretary of State shakes his head, but he knows the figures. In the next financial year, public spending in Northern Ireland will increase by 3.6%; public spending in England will increase by 6%. The disparity between what we get and what we need, and between what we get and what other parts of the United Kingdom get, continues to grow. That compounds the difficulties.

Some £297 million is scheduled to be taken out of our allocation this year and next. We are supposed to be grateful for the fact that it will not be taken out this year, and that the cut will be spread over two years. There is a projected overspend this year of £500 million, and a deficit of £575 million from public pay awards. That is £1.4 billion before we even start. I do not say that to be boring or over-detailed. Do I even care whether the Government agree with those figures? Not really, but people who should share our aspiration for a positive return to devolution when the circumstances are right need to recognise that there is nothing positive about the consequences of this budget—nothing positive at all. I am not an Assembly Member, but I suspect precious few will wish to take responsibility for the austerity and cuts that this Government have provided. That is why I say that people have just about had enough. They are not unfamiliar in Northern Ireland, despite how frustrating it is, with political discord. They understand the challenges in devolved Government. It is not lost on people, when we have just celebrated 25 years of the Good Friday agreement, that, for 40% of those 25 years, devolution did not operate. In fact, the majority of the time that it did operate was when the DUP and Sinn Féin were leading it, but the people of Northern Ireland are not unfamiliar with the frustrating circumstances that we find ourselves in. However, they want to hear a bit of realism.

When the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who is not with us today, was batting back and forth with me in January on need and the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, he dismissed those points. In fairness to him, we corresponded thereafter—it is not often I praise him, by the way—and he took my initiative. He talked to his colleagues and got Committee agreement to hold an inquiry on these financial issues. The evidence sessions have been useful, highly illuminating and will be in our best interests. That is why I say people want to see realism. They want to see us working together.

Yes, we will disagree about different methods and different ways of doing things, but we should recognise that, when there is a core problem, we need to work on the core solution. When there is a deficiency in how we are funded in Northern Ireland, we need to work to address that. When we need more resource simply to stand still—not to provide luxuries, but to provide essential services that people need and rely upon in Northern Ireland—we will do that collectively if needs be, but the Government should not sit back and wait for some collective ask. They know the facts and they have ignored the facts for month after month.

I am delighted to hear the Secretary of State say that they will now engage in the discussion on need. That is a departure from what the Northern Ireland Office has been saying for months. It is not a departure for Government in policy terms, given what has gone through in Wales previously, and it should not all be one-size-fits-all. We need to ensure that we invest not only in the financial aspects of how we deliver for people in Northern Ireland, but in Northern Ireland itself.

9.47 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): It is somewhat opportune to follow the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), as before I talk about the role of the UK Government and the real budget crisis that we are facing, I have to say that, listening to him, the House would almost get the impression that the DUP was not an actor in the current debacle that we are facing and that it is a passive actor or a commentator on the sidelines. DUP Members talk about frustration, people sitting on their hands and nothing moving forward. I remind him that we are now more than four months on from the Windsor framework being concluded, and still we have no Executive and Assembly restored. Indeed, we are more than 16 months on from the Executive being brought down and still we have no progress being made.

I would be the first to recognise that an Executive would not be a silver bullet for our problems—there will still be a major budget crisis whenever an Executive is restored—but having an Executive is fundamental to providing some type of framework, a strategic approach, democratic accountability and transparency and proper scrutiny of what is happening. That allows us to plan ahead. It allows decisions to be taken on a cross-departmental basis. It allows us to protect areas that are crucial for the medium and long terms. Those are all things that an Executive can and should be doing.

In Northern Ireland, the frustration is not over the pace of what is happening and whatever fix awaits us around the Windsor framework; it is over the absence of an Executive. The business community—every single

[Stephen Farry]

business organisation—trade unions, the community and voluntary sector, health professionals and education sector people are all saying that they need an Executive and an Assembly back, and the DUP is sitting in defiance of that strong message from those people at the coalface. Every time they say, “Here’s what the Children’s Law Centre are saying” or, “Here’s what the education sector are saying”, they are selectively quoting because all of them are saying, “Get back round the table and work together for the good of the people of Northern Ireland.”

There is a real danger here. The DUP, in its own terms, is out there to try to save the Union because it believes that the Windsor framework undermines it. That is not my opinion; that is the DUP’s analysis of the situation. In trying to save the Union, in its own terms, it is in danger of killing the Union. It is saying, “We need to restore devolution only when there is a solid foundation in place.” Through its boycott of the Assembly, it is shaking Northern Ireland’s very foundations to their core. It is in real danger of doing real long-term damage not just to its own cause of the Union, but to the social fabric of Northern Ireland—our ability to have a functioning economy, to have a proper functioning health service that delivers for people and to have a proper education system. That is what is at stake at present. I urge the DUP to reflect seriously on its current route.

I turn to the UK Government. It has to be said that there is a certain air of unreality to what we are discussing today and indeed to the Bill. I recognise that it has fallen to the Secretary of State to intervene with both the written ministerial statement and this legislation, but we are not on a viable and sustainable pathway in terms of our public services and economy, budget management or governance. Something has to give and give very soon. The cuts themselves are illogical and counterproductive and they will bring long-term damage. We need to see reform and investment, but what we see is a spiral of cuts and a burning platform.

Northern Ireland is falling behind on a range of indicators. Members regularly highlight problems in the health service across Great Britain, for example, problems with waiting lists, access to GPs and access to dentists. Northern Ireland is struggling on every one of those issues and not just a bit more—it is significantly worse. We are falling behind on educational attainment and productivity. Whenever we look at the context on the island of Ireland, the contrast is ever stark. Life expectancy in the Republic of Ireland is now two years ahead of Northern Ireland; 20 years ago, it was the other way round. Things like that are happening through this decline.

On budget management, we see a major mismatch between what the guidance under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2022 says and the expectations that the Government are placing on civil servants. It is limited and contradictory. The civil service cannot initiate new policy and cannot tackle areas that are statutory responsibilities. That means that non-statutory areas have been disproportionately targeted, with cuts on things such as early intervention and prevention: actions that are vital not just to address opportunities for people but to avoid much steeper costs downstream that will have to be picked up in due course. Those costs may be with us for many years to come thereafter.

The Departments cannot live within the current control expectations placed on them. The Northern Ireland Departments collectively are overspending to the tune of £100 million a month. So one of three things will have to happen over the next few months. We may see the status quo continuing, which will lead to a massive overspend by the end of the financial year, which will be kicked into next year or subsequent years and become an albatross around Northern Ireland’s neck for many years to come.

Alternatively, we may see the Government recognising that this is unsustainable and intervening through a more formal version of direct rule, trying to balance the budget over the remainder of the year. That will mean even deeper cuts because trying to manage cuts over a six-month window is much more difficult than over 12 months—and doing it over 12 months is bad enough. If they go down that route, that will bring major carnage. By far the most benign scenario involves the Government and Northern Ireland parties agreeing on some form of a national package linked to a restored Executive. Of course, that negotiation would be much better done from the place of a functioning Executive, but whether it is before, after or during that reformation process, that discussion has to happen. I dare say that, from the Government’s point of view, the prospect or reality of a restored Executive will be a precondition for anything moving in that regard.

I welcome what the Secretary of State has said about the Alliance party’s proposals. We are talking about a process of stabilisation, which can become a platform for wider transformation. We cannot make Northern Ireland sustainable from that burning platform. So we have to invest to save and we need a genuine, multi-year plan. A certain degree of discipline from all the Northern Ireland parties over many years will be required to ensure that they abide by a programme for Government, if that is to be delivered. I imagine that there will be a degree of conditionality in what the Government will say in that particular regard. My party is certainly up for those discussions over the next few weeks. We welcome what the Secretary of State has said today and look forward to engaging with him over the next few weeks in that respect.

We also have the governance crisis, which I already touched upon. We need the Executive and Assembly back to provide that coherent structure for managing the situation. With a functioning Executive, we will be in a much better position to have those discussions around not just the financial package but the Barnett formula and addressing that squeeze.

I welcome what the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), said about the Northern Ireland Audit Office. What she said reflects the importance of respect for the independence of that body. I would add that the same points and logic extend to the Northern Ireland public service ombudsman. I concur with what the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), said about the Government’s response to clarify section 75 duties and exactly how they have been taken forward in relation to the Budget.

Although I have perhaps said a few harsh things, there is a positive future for Northern Ireland if we can get this right. Northern Ireland is a great place, but it

needs a Government to deliver. With a coherent Government, and with parties genuinely committed to working together, we can push ahead with invest to save. We can see what opportunities lie on the island of Ireland for certain economies of scale. On a purely economic and social level, we can do things without entering into the wider political and constitutional debate. We can address the cost of division—the duplication that comes from running parallel services. We can potentially see the reform of the Barnett formula, which will give us a proper needs-based platform from which to proceed. We can invest in prevention and support our community and voluntary sector.

Over the next few weeks, there are important decisions to be made. If people do not step up and if we do not get this sorted, the future of Northern Ireland will be bleak. If we can get it right, the future is hopeful. I want to be optimistic about that future.

9.57 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is deeply regrettable that we find ourselves in this situation once again. Sometimes, the Democratic Unionist party gets accused of not wanting to be in the Stormont and the Executive. To be clear to all Members across the House, we are a party of devolution and we want devolution restored in Northern Ireland. We want to take the decisions in the Stormont because budget decisions are best taken there. We know that, while our electorate want us to be back in the Stormont taking those decisions, they also clearly want us to ensure that cross-community consent is restored in that Assembly. That was the message on the doorsteps during the local government election. Although some will want to ignore that view, we will not.

Time is a precious commodity. Wasting time is not something I would indulge in—anyone who knows me will know that. There has been a criminal waste of time resolving issues with the protocol and the Windsor framework. Those issues could be quickly and easily resolved by the Government. Drift is not acceptable anymore. There was no drift when abortion laws were forced on the people of Northern Ireland. There was no drift just a few weeks ago when legislation on relationships and sexual education was forced on the people of Northern Ireland. There was no drift when Sinn Féin demands on Irish language legislation were introduced. When there is will from the Government to do something, they do it very quickly.

On a daily basis, economic harm is being caused to the people of Northern Ireland, with the continued placing of a border in the Irish sea resulting in Northern Ireland's place in the UK being continually undermined. Businesses and industries are being impacted and competitiveness is being undermined, yet there is continued drift on the part of the Government. There is no urgency. Often, there is not even a recognition of the problems caused to businesses by the Windsor framework and the protocol. We hear much from colleagues about the idea that the Windsor framework has resolved all the issues.

I challenge all Members to speak not to the trade bodies, but to the businesses that are being impacted. Speak to the manufacturing industry, speak to the agriculture industry and speak to the horticulturalists in Northern Ireland who are still experiencing massive problems with the implementation of the protocol and,

subsequently, the Windsor framework. What I want to see, on the back of this budget debate, is a change in attitude to addressing the most fundamental issues that are impacting Northern Ireland and keeping our Executive down.

Turning to the Bill, my first point is more general and has been made today several times. We welcome the Government's commitment to look at this issue, but my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has been to the fore and most effective in pressing for a review of the Barnett formula. I believe that debate is gaining traction—it is becoming abundantly clear at our weekly Northern Ireland Affairs Committee meetings. I welcome the Secretary of State's intervention today, but in truth we are again placing a sticking plaster over the financial needs of Northern Ireland, unlike our Welsh counterparts who enjoy a needs-based financial allocation. We can see clearly that this budget is about short-term financial decisions and is not based on the needs of the people of Northern Ireland, including the needs of the people in my constituency of Upper Bann. We want a restored Executive.

Robin Millar: The hon. Lady used the phrase “enjoying a needs-based allocation”. I would contest that. My concern is the risk that we end up in a spiral, with a kind of Top Trumps of deprivation. Who is the most deprived? They get the biggest sum. Does she not agree that there is a risk to attaching a purely needs-based assessment to allocations?

Carla Lockhart: The reality is that the Barnett formula across the United Kingdom, in all the different nations, is needs-based. It is important that we do not just give Northern Ireland an amount of money, but drill down to the actual needs. On whether that means tinkering around with what has worked and what has not worked in Wales, we are more than willing to enter into those conversations, and use the Welsh model as a baseline and improve on it. Hopefully, if we can make improvements in Northern Ireland, they can be transported to Wales as well.

Sammy Wilson: Does my hon. Friend agree that a financial allocation made on a purely needs basis would provide the resources to start addressing some of those needs? For example, if there were a high number of people claiming unemployment benefit because they had mental health problems, money could go into the health service to deal with those problems and get them into work, or for people unemployed because they did not have skills, the money could be used on technical education to give them the skills so that they could get back into work. The vicious circle that has been spoken about could be addressed by having the resources to deal with that.

Carla Lockhart: Absolutely. I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention.

We want a restored Executive not only to have firm cross-community consensus, but to be able to transform and deliver services effectively. For that, we need financial equipping based on need. As my right hon. Friend has indicated, those needs are really to the fore. If I think of my constituency, I think of the educational underachievement and the health needs. Those are the

[Carla Lockhart]

things we need to drill down into and fund adequately; if we do not, Northern Ireland will continue to be short-changed.

The Northern Ireland Office has recently been seeking to provoke discussions around revenue-raising measures. There is no question but that we are up for those discussions, but we cannot escape the fact that the Treasury's contribution to funding public services in Northern Ireland is going down rather than rising. Spending up to 2025, for example, will increase by 6% in England but only 3.6% in Northern Ireland.

I have a specific concern about the impact that the policing budget will have on communities. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) made a very helpful intervention on that subject: it was a stark reminder that the terrorist threat level in Northern Ireland is severe. In that context, we just cannot continue to ignore the concerns that the chief constable and the Police Federation have raised in relation to the capability of our police force.

Despite the commitments in New Decade, New Approach to grow our officer numbers to 7,500, the stark reality is that we are now on a trajectory towards 6,000, largely because of a failure to prioritise policing in our Province. The truth is that there is a risk of the headcount dropping further, unless the Government urgently deliver the financial firepower that local policing is crying out for. In an intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), the Secretary of State made the point that that is on the Executive, but I would put the ball back into his court: it was an agreement in NDNA. When there was a language issue in NDNA, this Government very quickly helped and intervened, yet on the policing issue they have not gone far enough. The NIO claims to support the excellent work that the PSNI does. It needs to back up that claim and actually financially support it.

Similar challenges exist for health, education and roads. Time does not permit me to list the challenges that I am seeing daily in my busy constituency office, so I will draw my remarks to a close on the time issue. The time for the Government to act on funding for Northern Ireland is now. The time to act to review the Barnett formula is now. The time to take the necessary steps to restore cross-community consensus for devolution is now. It would be wholly unacceptable and utterly reckless if time were allowed to pass and we found ourselves passing another budget Bill in this place, as opposed to in Stormont.

10.8 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): For the past five years, any budget that we have had has been delivered—sometimes fairly chaotically—here, not in Stormont. For the past decade, we have limped along with one-year allocations and without a new programme for government. Public services are at a genuinely precarious point, as colleagues have indicated; I might touch on that point.

It has to be pointed out, as we look at the context of this budget, that those factors are the consequences of two specific pernicious features of our politics over the past decade. The first is the austerity politics that have been practised by successive Conservative Governments

and are being foisted on the people of Northern Ireland with no visible care for public services, let alone for how we create a better and more sustainable economic future or tackle the chronic challenges that are contributing to the financial drain.

The second factor is boycott politics, which are being practised by the DUP right now and have been practised by others in the recent past with, clearly, no real regard for how that affects devolved government and public services, how it gradually wears people down, or how it gradually undermines the belief of the people of Northern Ireland that elections matter, devolution works and politics is the way to do things.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: At the risk of becoming a history lesson, may I remind the hon. Lady that between 1982 and 1986, following democratic elections, the SDLP refused to take its seats for a single day of the lifetime of that Assembly, at a time when people were dying on our streets in their thousands?

Claire Hanna: I am happy to correct the right hon. Gentleman's history lesson. That was not a power-sharing Government, and I remind him that subsequently, in 1998, the overwhelming majority of the people of Northern Ireland made a different choice. They said, "We want to work together, in our substantial common interest, in devolved institutions that put power in the hands of our people from all backgrounds and traditions." That is the choice before us, but unfortunately the Government are choosing austerity politics and the DUP is choosing boycott politics.

The thing that links those two toxic trends is Brexit. When the Government say there is not enough money to spend on public services, it is in large part because, as every forecaster suggested, Brexit has been economically disastrous. It is also a consequence of the disastrous Budget pushed by the previous Prime Minister. Brexit and the kamikaze Budget were the Government's choices, and it is now their choice to inflict this budget on the people of Northern Ireland.

When the DUP says it cannot take responsibility for its share of governing Northern Ireland, it is because of the DUP's choice for a bone-hard, bone-headed Brexit. Despite all the protestations we now hear about the lack of consensus and the DUP's deeply held concerns not being listened to, for many years of the Brexit process the DUP refused to take on board the advice and pleading of many of us about the consequences of what we were being walked into.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: That is simply not true. One of the reasons why the DUP stated very clearly that it cannot support a hard border on the island as a result of Brexit was to take account of nationalist concerns. If only that had been reciprocated and nationalists had taken account of our concerns about an Irish sea border, we would not be in the situation we are in today.

Claire Hanna: I would be happy to give way in a moment if the right hon. Gentleman wants to tell me about any proposals or votes he made in this House with a view to achieving a solution that has the consent and consensus of all the communities. I was not a Member at the time, but I spoke at meetings in this House on a borderless solution being the only outcome without a sense of winners and losers.

As I say, this has been about choices. I do not doubt that the DUP's concerns are sincerely held but, on the choice to boycott politics, not a single thing is advanced by having no Government. Not a single technical concern about the Northern Ireland protocol or the Windsor framework is addressed by not having a Government. It is a choice, and we want a different choice. We want devolved government based on the common good and Northern Ireland's huge economic opportunities, and devolved government in which the SDLP can play a constructive role in opposition. To that end, we have already published our detailed triple-lock proposals to protect public services from these sharp, short-term cuts while creating a pathway to much better long-term governance.

If the DUP continues to immiserate our politics, and if the Government continue to press ahead with this budget, more fundamental choices will present themselves. The first choice is to reform Stormont's Standing Orders to make sure that one party can no longer hold up the formation of a Government. And if the DUP insists on creating the sense that Northern Ireland, as a unit, cannot work, the second choice is to realise the potential of all our people in a new Ireland back in the European Union. Especially when people are told that devolution within the UK is no longer available, the SDLP will pursue that aim vigorously and with honour, based on reconciliation and the potential of all our people.

That is a big choice about our future, but there is also a here and now that this budget does not serve well. Colleagues from across the House have highlighted some of those impacts. On infrastructure, our ability to address climate change, let alone things such as road safety, is hampered. The PSNI is facing its numbers falling to their lowest level, at a time of not just security threat, but increasing complexity of the issues it deals with, particularly on mental health. Across the economy, regions that are doing well are doing well by leaning into their economic potential and their successes, but instead we are cutting things such as the arts sector and Northern Ireland Screen, and we are cutting the budgets of Tourism NI and of further and higher education. All of these cuts undermine all of the flagship strategies about our economic future, particularly 10X. I am not sure where we can start on health and education, and I hope to be able to explore those areas in more detail in a Westminster Hall debate next week.

Schools have not been on the pig's back at any point that I can remember, but the projected shortfall of £200 million is catastrophic. One of the many things not being covered is a much-awaited pay deal for the most shamefully undervalued parts of the workforce, SEN classroom assistants. That could lead to further strike action, which literally hurts the most vulnerable children, including those at Glenveagh School in my constituency, who have already picked up much too much of the slack of the politics.

In health, we know that a standstill budget is, in essence, a cut and that we are doing nothing. We talked a lot in this House last week about a workforce plan, none of which reaches Northern Ireland. The Chairwoman of the Public Accounts Committee rightly highlighted cuts to the Northern Ireland Audit Office and NIPSO—the Northern Ireland public services ombudsman. Those are problematic in practice and in principle, because at many times in the past few years those bodies, particularly

the NIAO, have provided some of the only scrutiny we have had. They have acted as an effective opposition in some cases to aspects of Government waste and failure to reform.

In practical terms, discretionary spending is all but gone. Even permanent secretaries, who, as we know, do not like to dabble too much in the politics, are asking the Secretary of State to resolve that tension for them and asking how they reconcile their statutory duties with the budget they have. I hope that one of the Ministers can clarify the position. If their section 75 duties are always followed, as they say they are, will they clarify whether those section 75 assessments are content with the scale and depth of these cuts? What steps have they taken to identify and mitigate the impact? Have they received any advice about an overarching equality assessment?

Will the Secretary of State also clarify whether the Government have taken into account the long-standing guidance as well as the Equality Commission's investigation into failings in the preparation of the 2019-20 budget? What lessons were learned from that? Finally, the UK has been a signatory to the UN convention on the rights of the child for at least three decades, so will he clarify what regard they have given to the UN committee's recommendation that this budget be withdrawn and replaced with something that protects the rights and needs of children?

The budget is unworkable and it is a false economy. It is storing up so many problems, both in terms of democratic grip in Northern Ireland and in public services. Devolution has never been more needed. People in Northern Ireland feel that they are part of a political game that they are not playing and that is being played on them. I urge all of those with the ability to make these choices to stop practising austerity politics and to stop practising boycott politics, and to do so as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): In calling Jim Shannon, I just want to say: do not forget to leave some time for the wind-ups, Jim.

10.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I say what a pleasure it is to speak in this debate? I am pleased to follow the right hon. and hon. Members who have already contributed. My colleagues have clearly set out the case so far: there is a problem with the Northern Ireland budget. With respect, the Secretary of State, assisting those who wish to force the DUP—the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) referred to this and the tactics of pushing the DUP—towards an unfit regional government, seeks to blame the lack of an Assembly on the difficulties facing Northern Ireland. However, the facts as outlined by my colleagues are abundantly clear: the Government are underfunding Northern Ireland.

We are committed to making the Northern Ireland Assembly work. That is not in any doubt; but what we are also committed to is making sure that we address the Windsor agreement and the Stormont brake, which sidelines Unionists. Hon. Members should not just take my word for that; they should listen to Bertie Ahern, who has indicated that we cannot sideline Unionists when it comes to finding an agreement, and Tony Blair, who has said likewise. If we want an agreement that moves forward, do not ignore Unionism; make Unionists part of the agreement. It seems logical to do that, but sometimes that seems to get lost.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I am a very straightforward man, and I always try to be honest and forthright in my dealings. I am someone who believes in speaking the truth. I try to biblically speak the truth in love, and sometimes I fail in that, because I am a human being, and that makes me fallible. Today is going to be another stretch, because the absolutely unfair treatment of Northern Ireland by this Government is difficult to remain calm about. Some examples of that would include how hard it is for a family in my constituency to look at their 66-year-old father, who should be looking forward to retirement but is crippled, awaiting a hip replacement for the last six years. His health is getting worse, and there is still no hip replacement for that gentleman, and there are many like him.

It is hard to look at the 41-year-old cancer sufferer who, because of funding concerns, is waiting to hear if her treatment plan will be passed, and even more difficult to look at her three young children, who do not understand that their mother's treatment comes with a price tag—the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) referred to the financial issues and how they affect the Northern Ireland budget. It is hard to speak with young families who know that their child needs additional help to achieve their educational and vocational potential, and yet there is no funding for a classroom assistant to keep their child in mainstream education, or for their child to move to a special ability school.

We have energetic, hard-working and committed community groups, who do so much in my constituency of Strangford—and indeed in everybody's constituency, to be fair. It is hard to see tremendous community programmes, which are making a difference in communities, torn apart by the troubles in Northern Ireland. We have had some focus on paramilitary activity in my constituency and that of the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) over the last period of time, so we know only too well what is happening. Those community groups are closing their doors, as funding stops.

It is hard to look at all this and know that my own Government understand it, yet are unwilling to do the right thing—the thing that they have rightly done by my Welsh counterparts and their constituents. It is hard to know that constituents in Wrexham and Glamorgan have their needs recognised through the Holtham formula, yet Strangford residents are second class. As has been made abundantly clear, the formula is a UK formula, and the UK Government have accepted it as such. If they rejected it now for Northern Ireland, they would have to reject it for Wales. Yet here we are, with an underfunded budget and a Northern Ireland Office that blames the DUP for this issue. The budget is set in this House, as is clear from today's proceedings, and that budget is unacceptable, as many speakers—indeed, all of them—have established.

Forgive me if I am repeating what others have said, but the penny does not seem to have dropped in some quarters. Let me be clear, when the argument is made that the only way to sort out the Barnett formula is by returning to Stormont, that will not help by itself, because the funding problem is still there and still real. My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) outlined the disparity in the Barnett formula, and indeed

the Holtham formula. Wales had what should have been the hardest battle. It was the first country to be damaged by Barnett, and the Government knew that logically, in accepting the Holtham formula for Wales, they must also do so for Northern Ireland and Scotland. That is the argument of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), and it is my argument as well. Wales won the argument, and it necessarily won it for the rest of the Union. Going forward, it matters not who makes the point, because the Government have accepted the Holtham definition of need.

As my right hon. Friend said, if 0.7% of that was made available, there would be £322 million of extra money for the Province. Let us think what could be done with that in all our constituencies. Education in my constituency of Strangford could be greatly helped. We have been waiting for the college in Glastray for some time—the price is about £14 million, and the land has been set aside and already purchased by the education authority. That could be built if that £322 million was available. The schools across Strangford could have a wage increase for their teachers and their classroom assistants. Primary schools could have the renovations and repairs they need. West Winds primary school comes to mind as just one of those that has been waiting for some time to get necessary renovations and repairs.

When it comes to roads, I make this point honestly and clearly, with no disrespect to the manager of the road service in Newtownards, whose budget has not increased by the amount that it should have. There are roads across Ards that need urgent resurfacing but that cannot be carried out. If the £322 million mentioned in the briefing provided by the Northern Ireland Office was available, Mark Street, Mill Street, Beverley Heights and Beverley Road could be resurfaced, for example, and that money could make a difference.

I continue to represent the interests of the fishing fleet at Portavogie to the council and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The boats in that fleet are, on average, 40 years old. They are not energy efficient, although they could be. Grants could make the boats energy efficient or help the fishermen buy new boats, which seems to be happening in Scotland and parts of England and Wales. Again, that £322 million could make that difference.

I am minded to think about the police. I am a great believer in community policing, which is under pressure. I know the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) will be introducing an Adjournment debate and referring to the importance of police stations. In my constituency and across Northern Ireland, the role of community police is critical. They are the eyes and ears of the police. They can make policing better and improve the methods that the workforce uses. When I look at what could make a difference to my constituency of Strangford, and the whole of Northern Ireland, I am clear that that £322 million that we should be getting, but are not, would make a difference and make lives better.

Facts are clear, and I will conclude with that point as I am conscious of the time you have given, Mr Deputy Speaker. The truth has been spoken and now we are looking for our Government to simply do the right thing by my Strangford constituents, as has been done

in every other constituency. Stop punishing the elderly, the ill and our children, and do what has been done in the rest of this United Kingdom. Meet the needs of Northern Ireland as an integral part of this United Kingdom, as it is clear we still are. Actions mean more than words: speak clearly and plainly today. I look to the Minister for his response. On behalf of my constituents in Strangford, and those in the whole of Northern Ireland, speaking clearly and plainly today is my ask of the Northern Ireland Office.

10.27 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I thank Members from the across the House for participating so fulsomely in the debate. As always in these debates, there have been contributions packed with erudition, with insight into the topic at hand and with frustration about the situation in which politics in Northern Ireland finds itself at this time.

We have also heard from people who have entered the debate for the first time, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) for, in his words, “tip-toeing” into a debate on Northern Ireland. He did so with aplomb, especially by mentioning an issue quite innocuously, from his perspective, but tumbling into a pointed debate afterwards. That marks a characteristic entrance into debates about Northern Ireland, and I wish him many more going forward.

It is clear that we cannot keep setting budgets in this way and that structural problems in Northern Ireland are getting worse, in the absence of an Executive. In particular, the health service in Northern Ireland is creaking and has the worst waiting lists in the United Kingdom. The former Northern Ireland Health Minister, Robin Swann, gave evidence to the covid inquiry last week. He highlighted the impact that the collapse of power sharing between 2017 and 2020 had on health care. According to the BBC:

“Mr Swann said that the health service suffered from a lack of reform, strategic direction and long-term planning during that political hiatus.”

In his view, that “hindered” the pandemic response in Northern Ireland.

There is an obvious need for a budget that allows longer-term planning than we are debating tonight.

The other essential service to which I wish to draw attention is the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Policing in Northern Ireland faces unique challenges. I wish to pay tribute to every officer who keeps communities safe. Last month, the PSNI gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the impact that the financial pressures will have on the service that it delivers. This was the subject of an intervention from the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), early on in this debate. It was also referenced in a speech by the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood). On the headcount, the PSNI said:

“Last year, we reduced the officer headcount by 300 to 6,700. This year, a further reduction will take us to 6,300.”

If this trajectory is maintained, we will see the police service go to below 6,000 officers by March 2025. It is deeply concerning that the PSNI is very far off meeting the target of 7,500 officers as set out in New Decade, New Approach.

From the contributions that we have heard, I am hopeful that all parties are keen not only to restore Stormont, but to renew public services. We have heard passionate contributions, particularly around areas relating to education. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) talked about special educational needs and the provision of school meals in his constituency. The hon. Member for Foyle mentioned Holiday Hunger, the scheme being cut that he gave voice to in this debate. The hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) spoke about the impact on special educational needs and disabilities provision in her constituency. We also heard contributions related to other areas of public service that have been impacted by the current situation. The hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) gave voice to business and the voluntary sector, which is something that has been excluded from the debate, and I am grateful to him for doing so. Moments ago, we heard the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) giving voice to the elderly.

We also learned in this debate that the hon. Member for Foyle and the Secretary of State have been going to football together. That could be an innovation going forward, although I look forward to my invitation, too. Shadow Secretaries of State should surely not be excluded from such sporting events.

There was also an important contribution to this debate from the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier). She was most welcome here and we are all, I am sure, very grateful that she stayed this late into the evening to give voice to a really important issue—the lack of scrutiny and audit of Northern Ireland financing, particularly in periods when the budget is being set from Westminster. I am sure that the Secretary of State will respond accordingly, because she raised, in her words, “a serious constitutional issue”.

I welcome the update from the Minister on the revenue-raising measures that the Government have asked Northern Ireland Departments to explore. Has advice been received, and, if it has, how does the Secretary of State plan to act on it? There is clearly an appetite to put Northern Ireland’s finances on a more sustainable footing. At the same time, it is hard to see how that happens without an Executive. I urge the Government to make every effort to see power sharing restored, so that local representatives can agree a long-term plan with political accountability to their communities.

10.33 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): I am likewise most grateful to hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions this evening. I am most grateful, too, that the House again recognises that a Bill such as this is a responsible, but regrettable, step that we need to take as the UK Government to ensure that the delivery of public services can continue in Northern Ireland.

There are no easy decisions in the budget for anyone—not for us as the UK Government, not for Northern Ireland civil servants and not for a future Executive. We recognise that and we know that those decisions will not be going anywhere when an Executive returns.

It has become apparent to me that I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State may have been misunderstood on this point, so I want to be perfectly

[Mr Steve Baker]

clear: on their return, an Executive will face this stark budget and the difficult decisions that follow from it. But we are also perfectly clear that the right people to be taking those tough decisions are locally elected Northern Ireland Executive Ministers. It should not be the UK Government or civil servants plugging the decision-making gap. It is only through the return of Ministers in Northern Ireland that the vital reforms that so many hon. Members have referred to can begin to take place to put public services on a much more effective, efficient and sustainable basis, fit for the demands and opportunities, and indeed the previous advancements in technology, particularly in medicine, of the 21st century.

Let no one mistake what is needed: reform to the health system, to make the most of decades of improvements in healthcare through specialisation; reform to drive down the waste that comes from a divided education system, perpetuating divisions that would be unlawful once children moved from education into work; and reform to foreshorten the shocking delays in Northern Ireland's justice system and its appalling cost to taxpayers at turn after turn. Only through reforms and more will the public have the services they need and deserve.

What is the prize? In this debate, if I may say so, we have heard two competing visions for Northern Ireland: a vision of Northern Ireland standing with its hand out to the Republic of Ireland for subsidy, and a vision of Northern Ireland standing with its hand out to Great Britain for subsidy. This Government have a better vision than that. We have a vision for a strong and confident Northern Ireland standing on its own two feet, with a balanced budget, underpinning sound public services that have been reformed and are effective, and—yes—are properly audited.

We want to focus on the great, rich tradition and heritage of Northern Ireland's industrial spirit, on the great commerce of Northern Ireland and on Belfast, one of the great industrial cities of this great United Kingdom. We want private capital flooding into Northern Ireland. We know that the great people of Northern Ireland are entrepreneurs who care about place and community. We know that there is goodwill all around this world for people to invest in Northern Ireland, but they are put off investing by the absence of an Executive.

Stephen Farry: I very much share the vision that the Minister is setting out, but, leaving aside the language around handouts and subsidies, will he at least recognise that to get from A to B the restored Executive will need a partnership with the UK Government to ensure that we can take forward those reforms?

Mr Baker: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I shall come on to it in a moment, but I want there to be no mistake about this, either: as far as I can see from my vantage point, there is a pretty close correlation between poverty and paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. Leaving a primary school surrounded by razor wire in Shankill, I was struck by some of the murals I saw in that housing estate, commemorating and celebrating people who ought not to be celebrated. If I go to other areas of Belfast and elsewhere, there will be murals celebrating the other side.

It is time for Northern Ireland to be moving on. It is time to lift people out of poverty so that they have a better hope than the commemoration of a past that should never have taken place. No more looking back to a past that never was; it is time to look forward to a better future, founded on prosperity and sound public finances. Call me old school, Mr Speaker, but I like a balanced budget. Let us move forward.

Capital investment for a safe return from investors around the world, the rule of law, good government—the conditions are set. We have an entrepreneurial population, great skills, comparative advantage in financial services, cyber-security, advanced manufacturing and more. Crucially, we also have an institutional arrangement that, if people would only see it, is unique in all of the world: access to the UK as of right and to the EU as a privilege, UK services law and access to the UK's free trade agreements. That is a unique set of institutional arrangements to promote Northern Ireland's prosperity for the long run and deliver just the transformation that is needed.

It is true, as hon. Members have indicated in relation to the Windsor framework, that that comes at the price of a difficult compromise, with some EU law still in place. I confess it is a difficult compromise for me, as I have said in the past. However, we have to choose from available futures. At the moment, Northern Ireland's future looks bleak indeed unless we get behind the reforms that are needed to balance the budget for the long run. I believe that if we do that, if we come together in unity for our good purposes for Northern Ireland, we can achieve great things.

On the quantum that is available, the hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) seem to be united in the idea that the budget is some sort of punishment. The hon. Member for Foyle suggested it was a tactic. I say to him that that is categorically not true. This spending envelope is the spending envelope that the Northern Ireland Executive would have faced had they not collapsed. It is not the case that we would be punishing people in the way that has been set out. To listen to the debate—

Colum Eastwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Baker: I will, as I referred to the hon. Gentleman.

Colum Eastwood: It was not me who suggested that that was a tactic. The Secretary of State outlined the tactic in his own speech: he said that the next stages of the Bill will not be introduced until after the summer, and that that would give us all time to work together to get to government. It is clearly a tactic, although it is not going to work as a tactic. There are better tactics in my view, and I have laid some of them out to the Minister before, but it is a bit disingenuous to pretend that this is anything but a pressure point for the DUP that is clearly not working.

Mr Baker: I say to the hon. Gentleman that the simple fact is that the reason we are not doing all stages today is that summer recess approaches and we would trigger the Parliament Act inadvertently—[*Interruption.*] My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does not accept that this is a tactic. The reality is, as we have said, that this is the spending envelope that would have been faced by a returning Executive.

I have to say that, listening to the debate, one would think that the spending envelope in Northern Ireland was at the discretion of my right hon. Friend, but of course, as Members know, nothing could be further from the truth. Long, dreary documents on how spending works are available for the public to read. I am sure that the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) knows very well the documents to which I refer—I have given them a go. These things are fixed by our right hon. and hon. Friends in the Treasury; it is not at the discretion of me and my right hon. Friend to decide how much is spent. This is the envelope that the Executive would have faced.

The hon. Member for Foyle mentioned the shared island initiative, but that large sum of money was agreed, I believe, through the North South Ministerial Council and comes with a number of caveats. However, he reminds me that there are a number of super-tankers at sea here that have evolved through a number of political agreements. I think that we all need to be working with a restored Executive to rationalise how that spending goes forward. That can be done only with a restored Executive.

A review for the Barnett formula was touched on. My right hon. Friend said earlier that we recognise that introducing a needs-based factor in the application of the Barnett formula for Northern Ireland according to a mechanism similar to that implemented in Wales is an option that could be considered to put Northern Ireland's public finances on a sustainable footing. However, it took a number of years for the Welsh Government and the Treasury to agree a formula, and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) wisely cautioned us that that matter is not settled. He also cautioned us about the dominance of the public sector. That is why I am so firm that Northern Ireland must be founded on a revitalisation of its vibrant private sector.

Let me turn to the funding premium and the comparison between the percentage of funding for Northern Ireland and the equivalent spending for the rest of the UK. Let me be really clear because, in listening to the debate, one could misunderstand the position. Funding for Northern Ireland will increase from 20% to 25% extra in 2024-25. Insofar as that funding premium is forecast to fall below 20%, it is by the early 2030s but not immediately.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) for mentioning revenue-raising measures. We will have full advice by the end of this month. He referred to the remarks made by the permanent secretary at the Department of Education. We are very well aware that, to live with its budget, the Department of Education has already taken significant steps to reduce expenditure. I am aware that, despite that, there is a funding gap. Our Department continues to engage with the Department of Education and the Department of Finance to address that. A previous political agreement such as NDNA recognised the structural inefficiencies in Northern Ireland's educational system, about which Members may perhaps see that I feel passionately, and recommended a review to address them with reform. I welcome the recent completion of the review into special educational needs provision, and I look forward to the outcome of the review of education provision for 14 to 19-year-olds.

There has been a great deal of interest in the particular details of per-pupil funding. I propose to write to my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) in

detail on education funding. I shall place a copy of that letter in the Library for all Members who have expressed an interest.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) in particular raised section 75 duties and whether they are carried out by us and so on. As the ones taking the decisions, Northern Ireland Departments completed indicative section 75 assessments that were considered by the Secretary of State when he set the overall budget allocations. In light of those budget totals, Departments are now completing final assessments.

Richard Thomson: I am grateful for that clarification, but however good the intentions are, it seems to fall short of full compliance with what is expected under the section 75 procedure. Could those indicative assessments be put in the public domain, so that we can start to foster that wider political debate about the budget choices that are now being made?

Mr Baker: At the risk of sounding like a stuck record, the best way to get those questions answered is to get the Executive back and the Executive making these decisions—

Richard Thomson: And in its absence?

Mr Baker: That brings me on to a point I wanted to make. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I sat here throughout the debate listening to a number of Members imploring us to take one action or another, which would amount to going down the road toward direct rule. We have no plans to go toward direct rule. We have been asked what we will do if this situation continues. In the event that we need to take further steps, we will announce them, if the need arises and when the time is right, but we have no plans to go to direct rule, and no amount of pressing us on one issue or another will cause us to take up direct rule.

Regarding the Windsor framework, yes, there are some technical matters that we might deal with in order to fulfil the policy intent clearly agreed by both sides. Where there are technical issues we need to move forward on, please, let us take them up as technical issues and deal with them in the Joint Committee. Let us not again raise such matters up to levels that require the attention of the great statesmen and women of Europe. It is better to deal with these things in a low-key way.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: With great respect to the Minister, the matters that we want to be addressed are not matters for the European Union; they are matters for His Majesty's Government. They relate to the internal market of the United Kingdom and its workings. Either the UK Government are in charge of that, or they are not. When I see the UK Government introducing new statutory instruments to impose customs arrangements on parcels being sent from one part of the UK to another, I begin to wonder if the UK Government actually get our concern about the workings of the internal market.

Mr Baker: We certainly do. The right hon. Gentleman and I have walked a long way together over the last seven years. As he well knows, I regret that we have had to part ways somewhat at this point, but we are clearly

[*Mr Steve Baker*]

aware of his concerns, which he articulates with great clarity and force. I hope he will not mind if, at this late hour, I say that I will leave this to my boss, the Secretary of State, and the other parties to work through.

Finally, I think, I turn to the issue of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) set out in some detail. Of course we appreciate the important role played by the NIAO and other independent bodies that hold the devolved Government to account, and ensure that public finances are spent properly and efforts are made to improve public services. However, when the Secretary of State considered budget allocations, he needed to take account of the challenging budget context and reductions faced by other Northern Ireland Departments. In such challenging circumstances, we believe it is only right that we ask the non-ministerial Departments and independent bodies to find savings in the same spirit as the rest of the Northern Ireland Departments.

Dame Meg Hillier: My concern is that it is a disproportionately large cut to a very small budget. It means that the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland cannot complete her work programme for this year, and there is nobody else—no Executive, no Public Accounts Committee, no Assembly—that can do that job.

Mr Baker: Let me just check my notes to make sure I answer the hon. Lady properly on this point.

What we have done is roll forward the budget. The recommendations of the Assembly's Audit Committee were made in a different economic and budget context. We maintain that, by rolling forward the 2022-23 budget allocation to the Northern Ireland Audit Office and

other non-ministerial Departments, we have reached a fair outcome. I would be glad to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this matter further, but I think it better that we meet face to face in the first instance.

I hope right hon. and hon. Members agree that I have tried to respond to some of the main points made in the debate. We will write the letter on education funding. We do have a vision for Northern Ireland, which is one of Northern Ireland standing on its own two feet, with a balanced budget and reformed, effective and affordable public services; a Northern Ireland that is prosperous, happy and free, and is not always standing with its hand out to one party or another.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

That the draft Commonwealth Development Corporation (Limit on Government Assistance) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 6 June, be approved.—(*Robert Langan.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CONSUMER PROTECTION

That the draft Consumer Rights Act 2015 (Enforcement) (Amendment) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 12 June, be approved.—(*Robert Langan.*)

Question agreed to.

Police Stations

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Robert Langan.)

10.50 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The hour is late, but we still have an important issue to discuss this evening: police stations. In November 2017, the Mayor of London announced the closure of a substantial list of police stations around the capital, including Barnet police station. Ever since, I have been campaigning to save it. A key justification given for the Mayor's decision was that the number of crimes reported at police station front counters has fallen. It is true that the way people report crimes has changed in recent years—it can, of course, now be done by phone or online—but being able to attend a police station front counter and talk to someone face to face is still an option valued by many, especially the elderly or those who may not be comfortable in the digital environment.

Moreover, police stations perform other vital functions in addition to front counter services. Crucially, they are a place to locate officers, but they also provide facilities such as evidence and equipment storage, police vehicle parking, and custody suites and cells. As such, what is even more worrying than the loss of a front counter is the loss of the physical presence of the police in a particular locality. In the six years since Mayor Khan announced the closure of Barnet police station's front counter, that police station building has thankfully remained in use by officers, both neighbourhood police and other teams.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Theresa Villiers: I will.

Mr Speaker: I thought you would at least allow the right hon. Member to get under way. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Lady is right to mention community policing—it is about not just the buildings, but the community officers and the contact with their local communities. She made a very helpful intervention in the debate on the Northern Ireland budget that referred to that issue. I echo her request to ensure that not only the buildings, but the community policing is there, because it is the eyes and ears of the community. It is about making policing better.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the right hon. Member, if given time, would have got to that.

Theresa Villiers: I absolutely agree that community policing is vital. As I will explore in my speech, the presence of police stations is an important part of keeping policing close to communities. If we shut them down or retreat into a handful of buildings around the capital, we make it more difficult to deliver genuine community policing. Closing Barnet police station altogether and selling it off for redevelopment would leave officers with nowhere at all in my constituency from which to operate. That would be disastrous, not least because it could mean ward officers having to undertake long and complex journeys to and from the only remaining police station in the borough, which is in Colindale.

At engagement meetings linked with the 2017 closure announcements, I remember City Hall representatives indicating that one of the reasons police stations were now less important was that officers would be given iPads for processing paperwork, which they could use anywhere. Frankly, it is wholly unrealistic to expect a police officer sitting in Starbucks with an iPad to be an adequate substitute for a functioning police station. Apart from the noted reliability problems with many such devices issued by the Metropolitan police, that approach would violate confidentiality and data protection obligations. There is also the concern that a number of the Met's IT upgrade programmes have yet to be fully delivered, as highlighted in the Casey report. Moreover, officers would undoubtedly be approached by members of the public, making it harder for them to focus on the work they need to do. Their office time would inevitably become advice surgery time.

In February last year, I secured a promise from Sophie Linden, the deputy mayor for policing, that Barnet police station's building would not be disposed of until a base was found for ward police teams that enabled them to reach their areas in 20 minutes by walking or cycling. That was of course welcome, and it amounted to a partial reprieve for the station, but it is not an adequate substitute for a properly functioning police station.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): On this point about the connection with communities, particularly in Greater London, does my right hon. Friend agree that the basic command unit model that the Mayor has adopted since 2018 is having a negative impact on the ability of police to connect with communities, but also to respond to crimes in a timely manner?

Theresa Villiers: I am very much aware of the concern felt in many parts of London about the tri-borough policing model, and I think it is important to review it.

I turn back to the idea that new bases for police officers could be found. There is still real uncertainty about where these would be and what they would involve. The suggestion remains that a new base for police officers could be in a corner of a library or the backroom in a high street shop, but providing a base for police officers is not a straightforward matter. Officers have access to highly sensitive personal data, and they hold evidence from cases for which it is vital that they keep rigorous and reliable records of custody. Moreover, some police equipment is potentially harmful, such as tasers, and it would be dangerous if this kind of kit fell into the wrong hands. Special storage facilities would need to be built in new alternative accommodation. They could not just set up a few lockers in a local library. Flogging off existing police stations could end up being a false economy if multiple new premises for ward teams in different areas need to be bought and fitted up to replace them.

I also want to highlight the sense of confidence that the presence of a police station gives people—a sense that would be entirely lost in the areas where police stations are currently under threat. For example, the *East London Advertiser* reported that people felt that police station closures in Tower Hamlets meant that the area felt less safe. Complete loss of the remaining police presence in Chipping Barnet town centre would inevitably leave my constituents feeling more insecure. Serious concerns have been reported to me about crime, thefts

[Theresa Villiers]

and antisocial behaviour in Barnet High Street, including what appears to have been a serious assault that took place recently outside McDonald's. The sale of the police station and its complete closure would make it harder to grapple with the existing crime issues in the local area.

These worrying local crime problems were discussed recently at a meeting I attended of the High Barnet police community action panel, under the chairmanship of my constituent Mahender Khari. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to him, and to everyone who chairs or takes part in police action panels in my constituency. They do a vital job. That includes Councillor Jennifer Grocock, who has done excellent and innovative work on making neighbourhood police teams more visible by involving them in Barnet Council's community safety hubs, which were pioneered by the previous Conservative administration in Barnet.

I am also worried about the impact of police station closures on the viability of our high streets. We all know that town centres have suffered in recent years for a range of reasons, particularly the big shift to online retail. It has become harder and harder to get footfall to high streets, and I fear that losing police stations could lead to a further hollowing out of our struggling town centres, adding to the list of vacant buildings.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for her speech and for giving way. Last November, Devon and Cornwall police launched an online poll using SurveyMonkey, and invited the public in Devon and Cornwall to vote to reopen three front desks out of a list of 44. I was pleased to help promote that poll and to attend the reopening of Tiverton police station—and I hope to attend that of Honiton later this year—but does she think that we should not have to fill in SurveyMonkey polls to get to speak to a human being?

Theresa Villiers: The hon. Member makes the important point that much of what we are talking about is the ability of the police to maintain appropriate contacts with members of the public. That distance from members of the public is one of the problems that the Met is grappling with, and I think it is useful to hear his point of view about police stations and police services elsewhere in the country.

During this difficult era for high streets, we should try to enhance the visible presence of public services, not scale it back. That is another good reason to maintain the police station estate, both in Barnet and in other towns and cities. In her report on the Met, Baroness Casey highlighted that station closures are likely to have affected efficiency, with police spending more time travelling, and longer police response times. Recent research by Elisa Facchetti, published by the Centre for Economic Policy Research, pointed to a correlation between reduction in police stations and poorer crime clear-up rates. That suggests that the capacity to collect the evidence needed to solve crimes might be impeded by police having to travel increased distances, although I acknowledge that many other variables could be relevant, and it is difficult to establish a clear causative link.

Four important recent developments make this debate very timely, and mean that the Mayor of London should reverse his closure programme. First, the Government have delivered on the Conservative manifesto pledge to recruit 20,000 additional police officers. That means that the Met now has more uniformed officers than at any time in its history—and we need somewhere to put them. That radically changes the situation we faced in 2017, when the Mayor wielded the axe against Barnet police station and others.

Secondly, Baroness Casey's damning report on the Met cited the closure of 124 police stations as one of the reasons behind what she describes as "eroded frontline policing". She concluded that the combined impact of various efficiency measures, including police station closures, had led to

"a more dispersed and hands-off training experience for new recruits and existing personnel, which gives them less sense of belonging to the Met...greater distances for Response officers and Neighbourhood Policing teams to travel",

and

"fewer points of accessible contact for the public".

At a time when culture and conduct at the Met have come under huge scrutiny, we should not persist in making disposals from the police station estate—disposals that are calculated to make officers less connected to one another, more isolated and more distant from the communities they serve.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a speech that will entirely resonate with my constituents. Does she agree that the Mayor's U-turn on the closure of the Uxbridge police station, which serves my constituents, as well as those in Uxbridge and South Ruislip, demonstrates that the argument that there was simply no alternative but to press ahead with the closures no longer holds water? Does it give her a stirring of hope and optimism that other police stations, such as that in Northwood, already closed and disposed of by the Mayor, will be replaced with operational police stations, or that other stations closed by the Mayor will be reopened forthwith?

Theresa Villiers: I agree entirely. The Mayor's U-turn on Uxbridge should be a lifeline for police stations across the capital. That is one of the reasons why I am delighted to have the opportunity to make this speech.

I come to the third reason why the Mayor should change his approach. As part of the big changes that he is taking forward, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Mark Rowley, has asked his team to carry out a review of the list of police stations earmarked for closure and sell-off. I have made the case strongly for saving Barnet police station in a number of meetings with senior police officers, including Sir Mark. That includes at a meeting in May, at which Sir Mark acknowledged how important it is for the police to be close to the communities they serve. He also accepted that whether physical premises are retained or closed inevitably has an impact on whether officers can genuinely be close to the community.

I understand that that is one of the reasons why the review, expected to report at the end of the summer, was set up. I sincerely hope that it provides a lifeline for Barnet police station and other communities experiencing

the same closure threat. That includes Sidcup, Notting Hill and Wimbledon. My hon. Friends the Members for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) and for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) have all fought hard for their local police station, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds).

Until a few days ago, the places where police stations were in jeopardy and teetering on the brink of sale and redevelopment included Uxbridge. That brings me to my fourth and final point. Uxbridge was on the same closure list as Barnet in 2017. When the Mayor announced its shut-down, Conservative Hillingdon Council offered to buy the site at the market rate, and to provide a £500,000 revenue contribution and a leaseback arrangement, so that the community could keep its police station and the services it provides. At the time, the Mayor rejected this plan out of hand. Undeterred, Hillingdon Conservatives campaigned energetically to save their police station, led by Councillor Steve Tuckwell, the excellent Conservative candidate in the by-election.

For years, those efforts fell on deaf ears at City Hall, and then there seemed to be a Damascene conversion. Suddenly, out of the blue, the Mayor announced that he had

“written to the Met Commissioner saying that the case for now retaining more police station sites across the capital is strong”.

He is yet to specify exactly which police stations may escape the axe he threatened them with six years ago, but this looks suspiciously like a by-election stunt to take credit for a plan to safeguard the police station put together by Hillingdon Council and Steve Tuckwell. It would be massively cynical if the Mayor’s U-turn were confined just to Uxbridge. I therefore take this opportunity once again to call on Mayor Khan to remove the threat to Barnet police station and confirm that its future is secure, along with other stations under threat around the capital.

In conclusion, when the plan to close Barnet police station was first floated in 2013, I fought successfully to stop it. I saved our police station back then, and I am doing all I can to save it again. I have raised this issue in Parliament many times, including twice at Prime Minister’s questions. The online version of the petition for this issue, which I presented to Parliament last year, now has more than 1,600 signatures. I assure the House and my constituents in Chipping Barnet that I will continue to do all I can to resist the Mayor’s threat to our local police station so that my constituents are safer and more secure and can have the visible police presence in their local town centre that they rightly believe is so important.

11.6 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

Let me start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) on securing this important debate and for speaking with such passion and eloquence on this topic. I agree with her sentiments about how important police stations are for our constituencies and our local communities. I say that having visited Chorley police station just a few days ago, Mr Speaker.

As my right hon. Friend said, police stations in our local communities are close to the people they serve. They help officers stay in touch with the local community

and connected to it. Their ears and eyes are on the ground picking up information, and they can serve local residents. They are also visible and reassure the public that the police are close to where crimes may be committed. It shows that police are available and accessible, and they can often respond to crimes a lot more quickly if they are deploying from a police station close to the local community, rather than one miles and miles away. My right hon. Friend set out a whole number of reasons why police stations as a physical location are so important.

In relation to police stations in London, I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that Mayor Sadiq Khan should look again at the closure plan he set out in 2017—I think it was for a total of 37 police stations—and reverse it. Some of those closures have happened already; others have not. He demonstrated with his rather opportunistic and cynical U-turn on Uxbridge just a few days ago that he could look at this issue again, and he should. We should keep in mind that decisions on opening and closing police stations are for police and crime commissioners—in London, that is Sadiq Khan—not for the Government. I join my right hon. Friend in calling on the Mayor to reconsider and reverse the swingeing cuts that he announced back in 2017.

It is worth reminding ourselves as we make that call that plenty of resources are available. The Metropolitan police have the highest funding per capita of any police force in the country by some margin, and that is excluding the national and international capital city grant and the counter-terrorism money they receive. On a straightforward territorial policing basis, the Met gets more per capita than any other police force. It receives some £3.3 billion a year. That figure went up by £102 million this compared to last year.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that the whole policing system across the country gets £17.2 billion a year, and the part of that spent by police and crime commissioners on local policing—the vast majority of it—went up by £550 million this year compared to last year. So the resources are there, and we expect police and crime commissioners to use them wisely—unlike Mayor Sadiq Khan, who is not doing so.

This might be a good moment to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich West (Shaun Bailey), who is in the Chamber this evening. His tireless campaign has saved his local police station in Tipton from the planned cuts. I am sure the whole House will want to congratulate him on his successful campaign to overturn a decision originally announced by the police and crime commissioner in the west midlands.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet made excellent points about why police stations are so important and why the Met’s decision should be reversed, one of which was about the extra police officers that we have recruited across England and Wales. Across the jurisdiction as a whole, we now have record police numbers—149,572 to be precise, which is 3,500 more than at any other time in the history of policing. The Metropolitan police also have record numbers—about 35,000 more than ever before—and, as she said, they need to be accommodated somewhere.

It is worth mentioning that the Metropolitan police could have had even more officers—an extra 1,000 officers—if Mayor Sadiq Khan had used all the money that was available. It is a great shame and a great disappointment to me as a London MP, as I am sure it is to colleagues,

[Chris Philp]

that he failed to do so. I therefore completely endorse the points my right hon. Friend made about police stations in our community.

There are some things that can be done to try to mitigate Sadiq Khan's terrible police station closure plans. In my constituency of Croydon South, we have a fire station in Purley—there is no police station in my constituency—and following some work between the local police and the London Fire Brigade, we have managed to move local patrolling neighbourhood officers into the fire station. They now patrol from the fire station around the neighbouring area, which helps a little towards faster response times. It is also more

convenient for officers, and they can share information with the firefighters based there. That is helpful, but it is not as good as having a police station.

Given the lateness of the hour, I will conclude. I thank my right hon. Friend again for her tireless campaign to save Barnet police station. The Mayor of London has record levels of funding; I only wish that he would use that funding a little more wisely and reverse his shocking closure plans.

Mr Speaker: I hope the Minister enjoyed the Chorley youth zone as well.

Question put and agreed to.

11.13 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 10 July 2023

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

New Housing: Swift Bricks

4.30 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 626737, relating to the use of swift bricks in new housing.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. This debate supports e-petition 626737, titled:

“Make swift bricks compulsory in new housing to help red-listed birds”.

This is an incredibly important issue, with a huge number of people having signed the petition. The momentum behind the campaign is the result of an incredible effort by campaigner and author Hannah Bourne-Taylor, whose energy, determination, expertise and creative approach to campaigning have helped raise awareness of the plight of this iconic and much endangered species. In preparation for the debate, I spoke with Hannah and representatives of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Wild Justice and the Home Builders Federation.

It is a fairly simple ask in terms of putting measures in place to provide for endangered species in new build housing, but this is an incredibly urgent debate, as these birds are, quite frankly, running out of time. Swifts, house martins, starlings and house sparrows recently joined the international red list of species experiencing sharp population declines, and it is essential that we take action to prevent their extinction. In the UK, the swift population has declined by 57%. Swift bricks are one measure that could help turn the corner for those four species.

The current Government approach means that policy on swift bricks remains under the jurisdiction of local planning authorities, few of which have adopted a requirement to put swift bricks into new developments; where they have, it is because local campaigners have pushed for the measure. There are questions around whether local authorities have the expertise and, indeed, the capacity to properly consider this as a policy. As the swift population continues to decline, it is evident that we need a new approach—a move to a national policy, which could drive much-needed change.

Swifts are incredible birds, flying from our roofs all the way to Africa and back every year and crossing the Sahara twice. Their top speed has been recorded as 69 mph—they are the ultimate urban boy racer.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): On the point about local councils, I have always been fascinated by swifts in North Norfolk. The east of the country is actually one of the better breeding grounds, thanks to our warmer climate. I am concerned that only eight local authorities have put any real effort into implementing swift bricks. Surely one area where we could improve, if there is not national legislation, is adjusting local plans. Why cannot local authorities ensure in their local plans that swift bricks are used in all new buildings to help solve this problem?

Matt Vickers: My hon. Friend makes a good point. It is disappointing how few local authorities have adopted this approach. I am currently harassing my local authority about this, and I am sure many of our parliamentary colleagues will be doing the same. Today we are calling for a central approach from central Government to drive that.

Many of us watch out for swifts, believing they herald the beginning of British summer. Their status as an established British icon is clear from the support the petition rallied, capturing the imaginations and support of 109,894 members of the public from a wide cross-section of society and from across the entire United Kingdom. The number of signatures alone clearly demonstrates the public's concern about losing these iconic birds completely, which would be a huge loss to our country's biodiversity and culture. A loss of nesting sites has been cited as one of the biggest factors in the decline of bird populations. Embarrassingly, the UK has been rated as the worst in the G7 for the amount of wildlife and wild spaces lost to human activity, as measured in the biodiversity intactness index.

The issue stems from a lack of swift nesting sites, which are commonly found in the eaves of our houses or in gaps in brickwork. Swifts nest inside draughty spaces, which we target with mortar and expanding foam when we go about remodelling, renovating and insulating. Since 2013, the Government's energy company obligation scheme has insulated 2.4 million homes, including by providing external wall insulation. Millions of birds have lost their homes due to us improving our homes' energy efficiency and the issue's rising status in the Government's agenda. As we demolish 50,000 buildings each year, so that figure grows. The loss of nesting sites is particularly hard for swifts and house martins, which are site-loyal birds: they and their life mates return to the exact same site every year to nest.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a wonderful speech. One of my constituents, Helen Lucy, came to see me and presented me with a very informative booklet about this campaign. Does he agree that there is no reason why action cannot be taken? I have written to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ask for swift bricks to be made a national planning requirement. They are a win-win: they do not cost house builders much, and they would help to save the swift. As the hon. Gentleman said, the swift population in this country has declined by 57%. Swift bricks are an example of a simple action that the Government and those in power can take to make a real difference to wildlife in our country.

Matt Vickers: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point: swift bricks cost little and have a huge impact. That is our ask to the Government, but regardless of whether we manage to pull it off today, I hope we will all go back to our constituencies and local authorities and drive for a bit more change.

When swifts return from their perilous nine-month flight and find that their nesting site has been blocked off or destroyed, they try to break entry. They are, unsurprisingly, not strong enough to break through several layers of insulation, and many injure themselves in their attempt to get back into their old nesting spots. If they are unable to fly, they will likely die. If they do not succeed but survive, they face a tough task of

[*Matt Vickers*]

finding a new spot to nest in time to breed. That leads to many missing the mark, with the consequence that the population fails to grow again.

Old nesting spots are being lost, and new developments do not provide an alternative. Modern developments have no purpose-built nesting habitat for these birds and lack natural alcoves for birds to shelter. The swift brick is an answer to that problem. It is an intended nesting spot, providing permanence. It is a bespoke option that can host a wide range of nature. It has been designed to fit the dimensions of a standard UK brick, and is highly suitable for developments, since the overwhelming majority of modern houses are built from bricks or blocks. The bricks sit inside the wall and do not compromise its strength or insulation. They are fully enclosed, with a small, outward-facing hole for the swifts to enter. They are not offensive to look at and can be adapted to comply with the strict aesthetic requirements that developers need to meet.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As the planning Minister at the time, I had a hand in the changes to the national planning policy framework that encouraged the uptake of swift bricks, so I am pleased that this debate is taking place. Does my hon. Friend agree that there are two further advantages to the brick over the box? First, although the brick is primarily aimed at swifts, it can also offer a home to another species that is in decline, and which was the music of my childhood—the house sparrow. We do not see them as much as we used to in urban areas.

Secondly, particularly in the south-east of England, the brick protects swifts from being evicted by the parakeet. The six swift boxes on my house have been overtaken by parakeets, which are able to widen the opening because it is wooden, rather than brick. Using bricks would give other species opportunities and would protect swifts from being evicted by more aggressive species.

Matt Vickers: I bow to the experience and knowledge of my right hon. Friend, who is the proud owner of six swift boxes—hopefully he will use bricks. He makes a very good point. I used to listen to the house martins when I was younger; I have not heard much from them recently, and I would like to hear more from them in the near future. I thank my right hon. Friend for everything he did to get things to this juncture, and I agree that we need to go a bit further to ensure that these bricks reach houses across the UK.

In addition to permanence, the swift brick offers weather resistance and climate control. That is the most convincing argument for choosing swift bricks over an external bird box—other than the parakeets.

The first concern that some raise is the fear of noise or mess. People are concerned about what the bricks mean for their sleep, their patios and their clean washing, but those concerns are misplaced. Swifts are incredibly clean birds, which go about their business far from their homes, and they make minimal noise inside their nests. Surprisingly even to me, 85% of respondents to a recent survey said they would not be dissuaded from buying a house because of a swift brick, and the remaining 15% believed it would increase their likelihood of buying the house. What is not to like? Swift bricks are clean and noise-free, the public like them, and they could help to protect four endangered species.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. There was a particularly strange claim by the Government that there might be instances in which the provision of swift bricks are “inappropriate”. The RSPB has given that pretty short shrift, so does the hon. Member agree with the RSPB—and with me—that there are no reasons why swift bricks should not be appropriate in high-density schemes?

Matt Vickers: I would very much agree; in fact, I will come on to that. When we look at the costs—actually, we will come back to the costs too; we will come back to it all. I think the RSPB makes a very valid point. It is a no-brainer in many ways, and there is little to be lost by putting swift bricks into homes.

Kit Malthouse: There is another reason to commend swifts, which is that they are not actually here for very long. As my hon. Friend may know, they broadly arrive in the first week of May and certainly leave, like clockwork, in the first week or so of August. They are not here for terribly long, which is why we should give them a nice home to live in.

Matt Vickers: I very much agree.

So what is not to like? Swift bricks are clean and noise-free, the public like them and they could help to protect four endangered species. But what about the cost, and what do the developers say? Swift bricks are incredibly low-cost. They are already produced by multiple manufacturers, and home builders have the opportunity to shop around. Prices online start from as little as £25—although I do not know how much my right hon. Friend paid for his—which is pennies to large housing developers. Swift bricks represent one of the most cost-effective conservation measures and help developers to comply with their responsibilities in the Environment Act 2021, creating biodiversity gain.

After speaking to developers, and representatives from the Home Builders Federation, it is clear that they take their responsibilities for the environment seriously. They welcome the proposals and see them as giving clarity and direction and as a meaningful way of complying with the Environment Act. In fact, there are many examples of house builders being proactive and putting swift bricks in place without being compelled to do so.

In their response to the petition, the Government said they would not be legislating for a nationwide approach, because in

“some high density schemes the provision of ‘swift bricks’, for instance, might be inappropriate”.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I just wanted to ask a specific question about that. If it might not be appropriate—if a brick might not be inhabited by a swift—what is the harm? Does it matter? Of course it does not; the brick just lies there empty and uninhabited. I fail to see that that is doing any damage at all.

Matt Vickers: That is a very good point, and it is one that Guy Anderson, from the RSPB’s migrant recovery programme, has made in response to the Government. He has said that he cannot see any reason why swift bricks would be inappropriate in any development in the UK. He says:

“there may be some buildings where the design...makes it...less likely...to ever be used by swifts...however, even if...not used by swifts...red-listed house sparrows, red-listed starlings or red-listed house martins may use them”.

I would therefore urge the Government to look again at the policy and at what can be done to either enforce or encourage the delivery of more swift bricks in homes across the country.

To end on a brighter note, there are now many examples of swift bricks being used. One of the largest installations of swift bricks has taken place across the Duchy of Cornwall estate. The “Big Duchy Bird Box Survey” showed that, across all of the newly installed swift bricks from 2015 onwards, almost half had been used.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I want to give credit to the RSPB for this campaign, but also to the Stroud Valleys Project, which has been a really strong campaigner on this. It does things such as a “Swift Walk” around Minchinhampton common, which is absolutely fantastic. I wholly endorse the proposals for changes in terms of local authorities and planning, but what I want to hear from my hon. Friend is a real gee-up for everybody who is promoting the protection of these species, because there is actually a lot going on in many of our communities. I am not down on the swift boxes, by the way; while homeowners do not necessarily have the bricks, they can look to have the boxes. I think that this is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate these birds.

Matt Vickers: One thing to say about this petition is that, while there are lots of petitions that people sign because it is in their own interests, for the 109,000 people who signed this petition, this was not necessarily in their personal interests but was something that they saw as being in our natural interest and as a huge game changer for the country.

We can combine that result from the “Big Duchy Bird Box Survey” with other large-scale installations that have taken place. Barratt Homes is leading the way and doing its bit, going above and beyond. It has installed boxes on a huge number of sites, and it reckons that as many as 96% are being used, with that percentage increasing over time.

There is plenty of climate anxiety to go round at the moment. Unlike Hannah, I am not going to take my clothes off, and nor am I going to go round chucking orange powder and confetti everywhere, but I will leave Members with this thought. In a survey carried out by Lancet Planetary Health into climate anxiety among children and young people, around 60% of those young people said they feel extremely worried about climate change and our natural environment. This proposal is an opportunity to help to save four species at minimal cost and inconvenience. It is welcomed by the public and by developers, and it is time to get on with it before it is too late.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): The hon. Member can always use the swift brick he has with him as a visual display and hold it up. I call Caroline Lucas.

4.45 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward, to speak in this debate and to follow the powerful speech that has just been made.

I start in by extending my enormous thanks to Hannah Bourne-Taylor for starting this petition. It has been a real pleasure working with her, and her dedication to saving our precious swifts has been an inspiration.

As I am sure that many of the people gathered here today will know, last week was Swift Awareness Week, which was a chance for all of us to celebrate this amazing bird and the steps being taken to restore its numbers. But I have to say that I celebrate swifts every day throughout the summer, because they are absolutely my favourite bird; they truly are one of nature’s miracles. As we have heard, their migrations span continents, and I have read that a single bird has been known to fly over 1 million miles in its lifetime. Their 12-week stopover in Europe, when they pause to breed in our rooftops, is the very definition of summer.

Swifts spend most of their lives flying; sometimes after leaving the nest, they do not land again for an astonishing three years. Indeed, they can do everything on the wing: feeding on insects and airborne spiders; skimming mouthfuls of water to drink when flying over smooth rivers or lakes; and bathing by flying slowly through falling rain. They can even sleep in flight.

Humans have long been captivated by swifts. Back in the 18th century, the English cleric and naturalist, Gilbert White, was inspired to write poetry about the swifts coursing around a church:

“To mark the swift in rapid giddy ring

Dash round the steeple, unsubdu’d of wing”.

Yet, alongside other cavity-nesting urban birds, such as house martins, common starlings and house sparrows, swifts are on the red list of highest conservation concern. As we have heard, their numbers are declining at a terrifying rate, with a staggering 62% fall between 1995 and 2021. But let us be clear: it is not swift populations alone that are collapsing. Swifts symbolise the decline of almost all long-distance, insect-eating migrants to the UK. Since 1995, the common cuckoo is down 35%; the nightingale is down 48%; the willow warbler is down 10%; the house martin is down 37%; the whinchat is down 57%; and there are many others in that depressing list. The thought that we could lose these beautiful birds from our skies forever is truly devastating, so we must do everything we can to prevent that from happening.

Many of the steps that we can take are easily taken. As we have heard, swifts are urban birds, making their nests in the walls of our homes and living side by side with us. When they have established a breeding site, they miraculously return there—to the same place—year after year. It is therefore thought that the loss of suitable nesting sites could be a likely contributor to the decline of swifts, with many old buildings being renovated or demolished and new builds not providing suitable nooks and crannies.

Swift bricks are a cheap and proven conservation measure, with evidence demonstrating that their installation is beneficial not just to swifts, as we have heard, but to other birds, such as blue tits and great tits, as well as what are perhaps less glamorous species on the red list, such as house sparrows and starlings. Despite that, swift bricks continue to be left out of developments, with recommendations in the design codes guidance and a British Standards Institution standard having failed to have the necessary impact.

So I wholeheartedly endorse this petition, and I urge the Government to mandate the installation of swift bricks in all new developments.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady makes a really important point about new developments, as indeed did my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers). However, could swift bricks not also be a planning requirement for extensions? In a cost of living crisis, many people might not be able to afford to move, and they might need to enlarge their homes, so if a new brick is going in, there is no difficulty in making it a swift one.

Caroline Lucas: I entirely agree with the right hon. Lady. With a bit of imagination, we could really make a difference, and hers is a very good suggestion.

I urge Ministers to act with urgency and, for example, to bring forward an amendment to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill to make this law. That step has been endorsed by many Members of all parties, the director of the Conservative Environment Network and former Government Ministers. It is not often that one points to such cross-party support for any kind of proposal, and this proposal has that cross-party support and could be easily put in place.

Let me say a few words about Brighton, because as hon. Members would expect, it is leading the way on this issue, as on so many others. Since June 2020, any building over 5 metres is mandated to include swift bricks, and the county ecologist has recommended specific requirements for major developments. That follows the redevelopment of the former site of Brighton General Hospital, which was home to the second largest colony of swifts in the south of England. The swifts had been using old and decaying ventilator bricks and other gaps in the walls as nesting holes. Of course, any repairs to the holes would have rendered them unsuitable for the swifts, so swift boxes were retrofitted into the building. They matched the existing brickwork and conformed to British brick standards, which meant that the boxes and bricks could seamlessly fit into the design of the building. The project is now being seen as a flagship example of swift provision. I pay tribute to conservationists in Brighton and Hove, including Heather Ball, who have worked so hard to make our city more swift-friendly. Local swift groups have been inspecting new developments to find out whether they adhere to the rules.

I want to take a moment to challenge some of the arguments in the Government's response to the petition. I very much hope that they will change their response. They say that although they welcome action by developers to provide swift bricks, they consider this

"a matter for local authorities depending upon the specific circumstances of each site",

and that they therefore "will not be legislating" to mandate specific types of infrastructure. That is a massive wasted opportunity. It would take such a small thing to mandate the measure nationally, and we know that not enough local authorities have done it and that it would take a long time for each one to come to a local plan and start to mandate it. This measure would have huge support and could be driven appropriately from the centre. Instead, the Government have pointed to planning conditions that local authorities can impose and the introduction of new local nature recovery strategies. Although some local authorities mention swift bricks in their guidance for local plans, only a handful have made it a condition for new housing, and although local recovery strategies may identify swift bricks as important, there is currently no legal link into the planning system.

A legal duty to include swift bricks in all new developments is essential to deliver the new level of action that is required to save our swifts. As the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) mentioned, there are also ways that we could extend that duty to extensions and other moments when people do work on their homes. The hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) has already quoted the RSPB, which quite clearly demolished the idea that swift bricks can sometimes be inappropriate, so I hope that the Government will not keep saying that. Instead, let us see a change on this as soon as possible.

Time is not on our side. As I have said time and again in this House, the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, with a staggering 15% of species now at risk of extinction. Swift bricks and swift boxes are important, but they are far from enough. Nature is under assault from every angle—from our intensive agricultural system, which douses our fields in poison, to ancient woodlands being destroyed to make way for roads and railways, and water companies incessantly pumping sewage into our waterways. If we are to have any chance of changing that terrifying picture, we must start by quite literally making a home for nature—by living once again with a species that has long been our closest neighbour.

If the swift goes, it will be its own tragedy, but it will also be symbolic of so much else. The author, naturalist and campaigner Mark Cocker has just written a wonderful book about swifts, which I warmly commend, called "One Midsummer's Day". He writes:

"The declines are profoundly troubling but they are important in an additional sense. They are part of the birds' deeper capacity to serve as symbols for all life. For this in truth is a deeply troubled planet... Until now we have seemed unwilling to educate ourselves, or to feel in our deepest core, that life is a single unitary whole: that all parts are fused inextricably within a self-sustaining, mutually giving, mutually dependent, live fabric".

If we were truly to live as if that were true, we would know that taking care of nature is a way of taking care of ourselves and all the other species with which we are so privileged to share this one precious planet.

Mandating the use of swift bricks in new buildings is one of the smallest and simplest steps we could take, but it would symbolise so much more. It would be that first step, but it would also be a symbol of our recognition of deeper interconnectedness. It is a step I hope that the Government take, and I hope that all Government Members who have spoken so strongly about the importance of swift bricks will carry that passion into future debates about things like industrialised agriculture, which is sadly destroying precious nature and is such a force for ill.

4.55 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward, and it is an enormous pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who spoke so passionately and powerfully—and it is a passion that I entirely share. One of the great things about Westminster Hall is that we are able to debate things for which time often would not be found in the main Chamber, and to bring forward our own passion for a particular topic. As I will explain in a moment, I have had a passion for this matter for many years.

I pay tribute to my constituent, Hannah Bourne-Taylor, for her incredible passion and for getting this petition going. She came to see me a couple of months ago to ask me whether I would be prepared to support it, and it gave me enormous pleasure to say to her in my constituency surgery that I was only too delighted to support it because I care about the subject enormously. I pay tribute to her for bringing it to the national stage; that is an enormous achievement.

As we have heard, swifts are extraordinary birds, and I will spend a few moments explaining why they are extraordinary in order to show why we need to take action. Swifts are breathtakingly charismatic. They are the fastest birds in the world in level flight. Once they start and take wing, they essentially never land again except for the purposes of breeding, so when a swift takes flight for the first time, it will probably not land again for two to three years. They learn to do absolutely everything on the wing: they are incredibly fast; they can eat up to 10,000 insects a day; they can drink on the wing; extraordinarily, they can even sleep on the wing.

One great pleasure of living in a rural area like my part of the world in west Oxfordshire is going out of an evening and watching swifts as they dash around at rooftop level. That is usually young swifts looking for somewhere to nest. As the hours tick by, they circle higher and higher and higher into the sky. They do that to gain altitude, so that they can essentially, as I understand it, shut down part of their brain to sleep while the rest of their brain keeps them airborne—utterly extraordinary. They are so perfectly adapted for flight that they have difficulty landing, and that is part of the reason that they do not; their legs have shrunk to such a small size that if they ever do land on a flat surface, they are not able to take off again.

Everything they do is on the wing. This is important not just because swifts are incredible birds, although they are and I want to take action because they are incredible, but because it shows why we have to do something. Unlike other species, they cannot adapt to normal nest boxes. Swifts are one of those birds that in their way—a bit like cats and dogs—have learned a little bit over the years that humans are a good species to live alongside. They started off their ecological evolutionary life living in cliffs and trees, but realised that the houses that humans lived in left little gaps just under the roofs that are protected from the weather and are very much like a cliff, so they slot into them, have their eggs, raise their chicks and then leave. We have provided that critical space for them but, when buildings are renovated, that space is being taken away. Having learned to live alongside us because we are good partners to them, they are now losing out on that habitat; and we ought to do something about that.

As we have heard in a brilliant speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), some people may say, “Well, do I want them living in the roof?”, to which I would reply, “Yes, you do. You almost certainly won’t know they are there. They don’t leave mess outside. They don’t make any noise when they are in the nest. You simply won’t know they are there, apart from seeing their little dart as they fly down.”

That dart down is important because swifts generally nest at a height not unlike that of the rafters of Westminster Hall, because there is a danger of them grounding so they have to have a drop. They have to be able to push

themselves out, drop and get enough airspeed to be able to keep flying, so beautifully and perfectly adapted are they, but that means that action must be taken for them in a specific way. Normal nest boxes will not work. We need to think of a way to integrate them into homes and houses. It is easy to do that with swift boxes, but swift bricks are even better.

A swift brick is built into the housing and therefore protects the birds inside from the heat and wind. It is utterly unobtrusive. Unless someone knows that it is there and is looking for it in a building, they will not even know, that it is there. These things are totally unobtrusive and are cheap and easy to put in. I know that that is the case, because I have done it twice myself. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), I have put swift boxes up and put in swift bricks. There are a number of ways in which people can do it. The first time that I did it, when I became interested in this subject many years ago, I partnered with the Cherwell Swifts Conservation Project, which is one of the action groups in my part of the world, and we put swift bricks into the tower of Bladon church; that is the village I live in. No one will know that they are there. The swifts of course know that they are there. They see them; they are high up, and once they start using them, it is simply an unobtrusive part of the church fabric. There is no impact on the inside of the church. It simply provides that nesting space.

I went on to put a nest box outside and then put in some swift bricks when I built an extension. My right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) was absolutely right: we can do this for new builds, for existing homes and when we build an extension. It is quick, cheap and easy. There is nothing not to like about this.

The problem is that for an individual to do this, they have to have a certain level of enthusiasm and knowledge. I know that a lot of people here have that, but it is too much to expect everybody, all over the country, to have it. Much the same applies to local authorities, which have many important functions to carry out; it is expecting a lot of them to expect them to understand the precise nature of where a swift brick should be put and how. The good news is that we can help with that. Through guidance, legislation and working on the biodiversity net gain framework, we can do that here. I am not the sort of person who always rushes to say, “Government must do something. Government must legislate”—sometimes I think it is best that the Government do not do that—but there are things that the Government can do that are quick, easy and cheap, and have no ill effects at all. They can do this by providing guidance and a bit of legislation, and it makes an enormous difference.

The things that we can do include the legislation that has been spoken about already. If we want to see a more biodiverse world, we will have to take steps, and this is one of the steps that can very easily be taken. In any event, we can work on the biodiversity net gain matrix to ensure that buildings are taken as a habitat, because here is the problem with swifts: they use only the sky and buildings, neither of which count in the biodiversity net gain matrix, so it clearly will not help them. We can change that by understanding that for a swift, a building is its habitat, and that is something that we can do right here, right now.

[Robert Courts]

I thank the House very much for listening to my enthusiasm on this subject, which I know is shared by so many. I really feel that this is something that we can do. It will make an enormous difference to the natural world and to swifts, but it will be good for us, too. Let us see it happen.

5.2 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Edward, and to follow such a passionate speech from the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts).

I, too, am a rural MP, and the benefits and protection of swifts is an issue that is incredibly important to my constituents. Indeed, one of my constituents, Sarah Gibson, is the author of a fantastic book about swifts called "Swifts and Us". Although I have not read it yet, I have obtained a copy and I am very much looking forward to reading it. A total of 305 people from North Shropshire signed the petition, and I have received frequent casework about the topic of swift conservation and the importance of ensuring that swift bricks are included in planning regulations.

It is understandable that so many people feel passionately about this matter, because as we have heard this afternoon, swifts are incredible birds. They do everything on the wing, so they do everything while they are still in the air—sleeping, mating, bathing, all while in flight. They also eat in flight, efficiently chasing down insects while in the air. In case that is not impressive enough, they are our fastest bird in level flight and have been recorded flying at almost 70 mph. Of course, on top of that, they are beautiful. The sight and sound of them coming in and out of the eaves of buildings are, for many people, the first signs of summer. I am sure that colleagues here will agree with me that the best canvass sessions are the ones with swifts screaming over the top of our heads.

Unfortunately, the swift population is declining. The number of swifts in the UK has decreased by nearly 60% since 1995. This is yet another reminder of the rapid rate of decline of a beautiful and important species. Like many other birds, such as the house martin, swifts joined the red list for the first time in 2021. Something must be done.

I confess that before I was an MP I had not heard of a swift brick, but I have since become aware of the campaign, and they seem to me to be a fantastic solution. They offer artificial homes for swifts, which the British Trust for Ornithology has said works incredibly well for the reintroduction of swift nesting sites in areas where they have been lost. Swift bricks have been incorporated into new planning developments in both urban and rural areas over the last few years. Alongside being cheap to produce, one of the main benefits of the bricks is that they can be implemented easily into many kinds of developments.

For example, they have been installed into the rooftops above Oxford Circus and the walls of Lambeth Hospital, and in Brighton, as we have heard. In addition, one of my constituents has created a Facebook group dedicated to the protection of swifts and designed to spread information about the ease of installing artificial nesting spaces in properties, which I understand has ensured

that over 100 new artificial swift nesting places have been installed to properties around North Shropshire over the last 12 months. Artificial nesting places such as swift bricks seem like a fantastic solution to a serious problem.

I am even ensured by Swift Conservation that parents eat the chicks' droppings, meaning that there are no piles of droppings under the nests. That is surely another benefit for homeowners, who might be concerned about having artificial nesting places for swifts in their property. The benefits of swift bricks are not only that they protect these most impressive animals, but that they provide nests for other types of endangered species, including other red-listed birds such as the house sparrow, starlings and wrens, which we have already heard about. While assisting the longevity of the swift, swift bricks would also create a home for other endangered species and improve biodiversity.

There is another hurdle to swifts' attempt for survival that lies outside habitat creation and is related to their diet. A swift's diet consists mainly of insects, specifically flying insects, of which they can eat as many as 100,000 in one day. They include aphids, flying ants and mosquitoes. The Wildlife Trusts have raised concerns about ensuring that there are enough insects to feed an increase in swifts. The decline in insect species is a sure sign of nature being under threat in the UK. The pollution of prime feeding habitats for swifts, such as wetlands and grasslands, presents another potential barrier to swifts flourishing in the UK.

The issue is twofold. We must provide sufficient space for swifts to live, but we must also consider their need to feed by tackling the depletion of insect varieties head on. Overall, I support Members' calls to back the mandatory use of swift bricks in all new homes and extensions. As we have heard, it could be done so easily and quickly. It could be a measure we add to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, or there are opportunities in the national planning policy framework and the future homes standard, all of which we are waiting to see; they could all incorporate this important measure.

We should also stress that to support biodiversity for all bird populations, we must look at insect decline and a sufficient food supply for these impressive birds. I would therefore say to the Minister: look at planning regulations, look at the levelling-up Bill, look at the national planning policy framework and future homes standard and take this simple step to make the first move in support of these amazing birds and biodiversity the UK.

5.8 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as always, Sir Edward. I congratulate Hannah on bringing this petition forward, and I thank the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for introducing the debate. It was a real privilege to be asked by the RSPB, quite a long time ago now, to be the species champion for the swift, but I am clearly not the only one—this whole room is full of champions for the swift. I think I rather lucked out in being chosen ahead of them. We have heard so much about what an amazing bird it is, so I will not go over that ground again.

Soon after taking up the role of species champion, I went to visit Bristol Swifts and saw the dedication among these local groups. A couple had spent seven years trying to attract swifts to their homes. Having put in the bricks and played mating calls, they finally managed to get the swifts to come, and last year their swift boxes provided nests for 16 breeding pairs and 36 chicks. That is just in the one home.

There are many other amazing groups. Particularly over the past year or so, I have seen on Twitter how many there are in localities such as Rother, Hastings, Lewes and Sheffield.

Caroline Nokes: I apologise for intervening a lot, but it would be remiss of me not to congratulate Hampshire Swifts on its work. I opened a conference for it back in 2018, and it has contributed to the planning process and fed into the local plan review. Groups such as that are doing so much to push this issue; it just requires the Minister to push it over the line.

Kerry McCarthy: It certainly does. I was going to mention Hertford and Halesworth, and now I can say Hampshire too. Cambridge also has a group.

I pay particular tribute to Save Wolverton's Swifts and Martins, which has a special place in my heart because it is run by my sister, who is in the Public Gallery. That shows the difference between us: I am always here talking about things, and she is actually out there doing things. That group has provided 170 new homes for swifts since 2020, and this year swifts have finally taken up home in her house.

Last year, because the heatwave made the bricks too hot, there was a real problem with fledglings trying to leave before they were ready to fly. All around the country, local groups rescued swifts; my sister cared for 17. I remember going down to Sidcup to pick up her daughter from university, and as the three of us sat outdoors at a Sri Lankan restaurant, there was a swift on the other chair being fed crickets—it had to be fed every hour to keep it alive. My sister did that while juggling three kids and working a full-time job.

An interesting fact is that a swift weighs the same as a Cadbury's creme egg. Save Wolverton's Swifts and Martins is making egg cosies to raise funds for swift groups. If anyone wants one, I am sure I can arrange that.

I also want to thank Milton Keynes Swifts, which works very closely with Save Wolverton's Swifts and Martins. I thank Mike LeRoy for sending me a comprehensive briefing about the work that group is doing with developers and housing associations. It was particularly helpful on biodiversity net gain, which I will come to in a moment.

As we have heard, when a building is demolished or renovated, swifts lose their nests, and new buildings do not always offer the same nooks and crannies. That habitat loss is one of the reasons swifts are now red listed. They are a conservation concern, as their numbers fell by 62% between 1995 and 2021.

Other Members have explained effectively that swift bricks are very simple and easy to use. They blend into the building and do not affect insulation. That issue has been raised with me, particularly given the discussion at the moment about the need to retrofit homes, but the bricks will not have an impact on the energy efficiency programme. They are durable, low cost and do not

require maintenance. Even if they do not attract swifts, they can be beneficial for other red-listed species such as house sparrows, starlings and house martins. Hibernating tortoiseshell butterflies and bees also use them.

Siobhan Baillie: I defer to the hon. Lady's absolutely fantastic knowledge of swifts, and I thank the former aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), for his amazing account of swifts' aviation.

Swift bricks have been around for many years—possibly 20 years. They are very simple and cheap to install. There is deep affection for these birds, not least in Stroud. I thank the 500 petitioners from Stroud and the thousands of others. Does the hon. Lady agree that we have waited long enough, so we need to mandate? The bricks are so simple, and it is obvious that we need to install them, but that is not happening at a great enough scale, so mandating will make the difference for that species.

Kerry McCarthy: As has already been said, only a small number of local authorities—Exeter, Hackney, Islington and Brighton and Hove—have taken the step of requiring bricks. I am working on Bristol, and I hope we will do that in the next iteration of its local plan. That is tiny compared with the potential of what we can do. It would be so easy to have swift bricks in all new developments—not just new housing, although the petition is about housing, but other buildings too. We need to do something to turn this from a nice little local initiative into something that is far more widespread.

It is important to say that developers are not opposed to this proposal. Barratt Homes has actively worked with the RSPB to develop a swift brick and has pledged to install swift bricks in all new houses built in Bristol as well as in several other cities. I actually went up on the roof of one of its new houses in Blackberry Hill—one of those classic “MP in a hard hat”-type pictures—to do that. Another sister of mine is working with a housing developer in Milton Keynes that is also putting swift bricks into all of its new houses. This work can be done and there is no opposition to it, so there is no reason for the Government to be cautious about it.

Kit Malthouse: I just wanted to be clear about what hopefully we are collectively asking for. We are asking the Government to mandate the use of swift bricks—and the plural is important. As anybody will know, swifts are gregarious birds that like to nest in colonies, so putting in the odd brick here and there is unlikely to be fruitful. What we actually need is groups of four to six bricks, possibly more. As the hon. Lady said, in Bristol houses have got seriously more than that number. However, just putting in a brick—singular—is not much use to anybody, least of all the swifts themselves.

Kerry McCarthy: That is certainly the case, which is why we want to see this done at scale. As I think has already been said, the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management has highlighted surveys that show that buyers would not be put off by a swift brick.

It has been asked whether this would be a nuisance. I live by the harbour in Bristol and every time I open my balcony doors, pigeons and seagulls come in. Indeed, a particularly resolute pair of birds are determined to

[Kerry McCarthy]

build a nest on my balcony, so I cannot turn my back without them coming in. However, having swifts in a house is not the same as having pigeons or seagulls in a house. Indeed, they are excellent lodgers and most people would not even have any idea that they were there.

It is reasonable to ask why swifts merit a specific planning requirement, as opposed to any other creature that is under threat. I say in response that, first, this is a known problem with an identifiable cause and a practical, straightforward and cost-effective solution. I am sure that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would be delighted if we could say the same for all environmental challenges and all red-listed species.

Secondly, other species are already protected by planning policy in a way that swifts are not. The Conservation (Natural Habitats, &c.) Regulations 1994 require a developer's ecology report to cover protected species, such as bats, which are officially designated under those regulations. Mitigating steps are required if these species are present on site.

The problem is that the Birds of Conservation Concern red list, which was developed with funding from Natural England, is not covered by any similar legal requirement, and nor are swifts included in the list of habitats and species of principal importance in England, so there is no obligation on local authorities to consider swifts as part of their biodiversity duty.

The Government's response to the petition emphasised local planning decisions and

"the specific circumstances of each site."

Will the Minister tell us in what circumstances exemptions might be required? The benefits of including these bricks seem to outweigh the costs and, as has been said, even if the bricks are not ultimately used by swifts, they may benefit other species.

There is already a British standard on integral nest boxes to guide developers on selection and installation. There are also a variety of brick designs to suit different types of construction; an RSPB factsheet lists at least 20. The RSPB has said that

"there are no reasons why swift bricks should not be appropriate for high-density schemes",

And, contrary to the Government's response, the RSPB advises that

"connectivity to wildlife is largely irrelevant for swifts".

As I think has been said, swifts are birds that are either in the air or in their little swift bricks, rather than being out and about in nature.

Finally, I turn to the issue of biodiversity net gain, which the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) mentioned briefly. If, as the Government suggest, swift bricks are not appropriate for all developments, amending the biodiversity net gain rules would allow developers to consider whether swift bricks are an efficient way for them to meet their biodiversity targets.

Three years ago, I wrote to the then Minister for Housing—the right hon. Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher)—calling for the building regulations to be revised to make swift bricks compulsory in all new homes. I received a disappointing reply then, and the Government's response to the petition suggests that

their position has not changed. However, the regulatory framework has changed, with the introduction of the biodiversity net gain requirement.

The Government's own planning practice guidance emphasises the value of swift bricks to biodiversity net gain, but that is undermined by the habitat-based biodiversity net gain metric, under which the loss of a swift nest and the addition of swift bricks are irrelevant; they just do not count in the way that, say, hedgerows, trees or other sites for swifts' nests would count. Can the Minister tell us what incentive developers will have to install swift bricks when they will not count towards their 10% biodiversity net gain?

The biodiversity net gain approach is not perfect because the loss of a swift habitat will not necessarily be captured in the baseline assessment—I suspect the Minister might say that in response. If a survey is not conducted at the right time during nesting season—as we have heard, it is only a 12-week season—the nest is likely to be missed. But including swifts in the metric as a starting point would mean there is an incentive to look for nests and check the RSPB swift survey or the Swift Mapper app. I am sure all the local groups would be delighted to assist the Department in telling people exactly where swifts are likely to turn up. Even if no nest is detected, it means developers have one easy way to secure some biodiversity net gain credits.

Milton Keynes Swifts this weekend was checking the nest boxes for a developer who had agreed to incorporate nest sites. It told me the development did not install swift bricks because the architect was not aware of those at a sufficiently early stage in the process. If swift bricks were included in the biodiversity net gain metric, it seems they would be more likely to be considered during the design process.

The biodiversity net gain metric already includes design features such as green roofs, so it is not a big ask to include swift bricks as an option. In fact, it is a lot easier to put swift bricks in than it is to make sure that a green roof is installed and thrives for years to come. Relying on biodiversity net gain has the added benefit of considering all developments, not just housing, with larger public buildings and commercial premises potentially able to accommodate more bricks.

Swift bricks also give more options for biodiversity net gain in urban environments—something that was sadly neglected in the Government's environmental improvement plan 2023. We have to ensure that we green our urban environments. We cannot have everyone's gardens concreted over and green spaces built on, and that offset somewhere way outside the cities. We must improve urban environments, and swift bricks are an ideal thing to do.

Does the Minister agree that the biodiversity net gain metric has adversely changed the regulatory landscape for swifts? I hope she will tell us that she thinks a revised BNG metric could be a useful tool. I know that that is a matter for DEFRA rather than the Minister's Department. DEFRA has already committed to reviewing species inclusion in future major updates to the biodiversity metric. I urge the Minister to discuss that with DEFRA colleagues.

On a final note, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said, we are talking about this in the context of a massive biodiversity loss and ecological

emergency. Swift bricks are one easy step towards addressing that, so I hope the Minister looks favourably on what we have said today.

5.22 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate the petitioners on securing today's debate.

Swifts, as we have heard, are truly remarkable birds. To me, their screeching calls are the sound of summer arriving. I love the sound so much that I use their call as the ringtone on my phone, although that has been known to confuse keen birders. Swifts are known to spend 10 months of the year entirely airborne and land only to breed. As we have heard, they return to the same nest site for a few short months to raise their young.

When swifts arrive back in the UK in spring after a marathon journey from their wintering grounds in Africa, they need two things: a safe place to nest, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) pointed out, and plenty of invertebrates to eat, but those things are becoming increasingly difficult to find. As our houses are renovated and old buildings demolished, swifts find themselves shut out of the nooks and crannies that they make their homes in. Habitat loss, pesticide use and other factors are also making it harder for swifts to find enough food to breed successfully. In 2021, the species was added to the red list of endangered birds after its population fell. In Chester, we have seen a 46% decline.

Swift bricks and boxes are a simple solution to the decline in nest spaces for these birds. I have had a swift box installed on the side of my own house by local members of the Chester branch of the RSPB. We have talked about domestic buildings, but we should be incorporating bricks into public buildings, too. When I was leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council, I was pleased to work alongside the Chester RSPB on its Chester swift conservation project to raise awareness of the alarming fall in breeding swift numbers in the UK and to co-ordinate actions to increase the availability of suitable nest sites around Chester.

Chester Northgate is the most significant development in the city for decades and was led by the council. Because of the importance of sustaining the local bird population, 20 swift hotels were installed in the Northgate car park brickwork as part of the Northgate project. I am proud to have promoted it as part of a progressive decision by a local council. Councils can go so far, but more support is needed. The Bluecoat building on Northgate Street in Chester, where my constituency office is based, also installed swift boxes as part of the Chester conservation project. The trust funding enabled RSPB Chester to increase the availability of suitable nest sites around the city by offering subsidised box installations in areas near existing swift colonies. Through RSPB Chester's swift box scheme, more than 80 boxes have been installed in houses and buildings in and around Chester so far. The boxes are free of charge, and the RSPB will even put them up for residents. I encourage any residents in Chester to consider putting a swift box up in their house.

The decline in nest spaces has a simple solution, and I am pleased that in Chester, among other places, we are leading the way. Swifts have been with us for millions of years, and I hope that we can ensure that this remarkable species stays with us for much longer.

5.26 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. Many hon. Members have talked about the constituents who urged them to attend this debate, and in my case the group Devon Swifts recommended my attendance. It has over 1,000 followers on Facebook and is pledging to turn up at shows and events in Devon under a gazebo to encourage other people who live in Devon to take a greater interest in swifts.

Two years ago, in 2021, swifts were added to the red list in the UK's conservation status report, and the RSPB reports that the number of swifts has halved in 20 years and that fewer than 90,000 arrived last year. The same is true of other species that can use similar nesting sites: the house martin has declined by 50% since 1960. It should be said that species that are on the list, which are retreating or falling in number, are being threatened on a global level. It is not just in the UK that numbers are falling. This is very much an international issue, and it is made worse by climate change. Environmental degradation around the world is affecting bird populations.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) hoped that some hon. Members present might also take a greater interest in wider environmental issues around nature degradation and turn up to the relevant debates, and I agree with her. While we think about compulsion and how the Government might make some things mandatory of developers, we should also think about the insulation of homes. Some 2.3 million homes were insulated in 2012, whereas fewer than 100,000 homes are insulated per year now.

Swifts prefer to build their permanent homes by squeezing through tiny gaps in roofs, and as older buildings are changed, modified or taken down, some of those nest sites become unavailable to them. Swift bricks can be embedded in walls in the upper section just below the roof, and they offer a safe space for swifts to establish themselves. The hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), to whom I pay tribute for securing the debate, referred to concerns around noise and mess, before he allayed the worries that people might have. I would add to that: he is right, but developers can choose where to put these swift bricks, and they could not be so selective if we did not have swift bricks. I have heard concerns about mess and noise from these bricks being used by other bird species—for example the starling—but the swift brick can be placed away from people, in a home where the mess will not bother people underneath. That is great: we can choose to put these bricks in a particular location. They help dozens of other species—not just starlings and swifts, but blue tits, wrens, house sparrows, house martins and many others on the red list for endangered British birds.

I was looking earlier at the RSPB's swift mapper. In my part of Devon, we have 114 pairs reported south of Honiton and 133 pairs west of Cullompton. It seems that the Government are opposed to making these new bricks a mandatory part of future planning developments, arguing that local authorities can choose to make this a condition on their own account. Typically, I would welcome that sort of devolution. Many areas that Westminster legislates on would be better put within the purview of local government, but in this instance I am not quite so sure: given that there has been so little take-up—only eight local authorities have chosen to use

[Richard Foord]

swift bricks—there needs to be a degree of compulsion. I pay tribute to Exeter City Council for being among those eight local authorities, but clearly, if we are to avoid losing further swifts in the future, we need to require developers to use swift bricks.

Kit Malthouse: I am sure the hon. Gentleman would recognise that the Government mandate an awful lot on housing, not least to do with human occupation—whether we should have a front doorstep, the dimensions of windows and, in London, even the height of ceilings. It seems odd that the Government would not mandate on something as simple as this.

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for that point, and I agree with him. It is an area where a small action by the Government could deliver a real benefit for our natural environment. I urge the Minister to listen to the strength of feeling, not just from right hon. and hon. Members in this Chamber, but from activists and campaigners here and in our constituencies. This small action could make a big difference, and I would be grateful to see this change made.

5.32 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, as ever, Sir Edward, and to respond to this important debate on behalf of the Opposition. I thank Hannah Bourne-Taylor for creating the petition and the members of the public who signed it in such large numbers. It is unsurprising but nevertheless still heartening to see so many people mobilise against the decline of nature across these isles and in particular in defence of the swift.

I recognise, as several hon. Members have, the contribution made over many years by local swift conservation groups across the country. The various initiatives they have collectively developed and implemented have made a difference, and they deserve to be commended for their work. I thank the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee and thank all hon. Members who have participated. It has been a debate defined by a series of passionate, thoughtful and informative contributions.

The debate has fallen to me to respond to as a member of the shadow Levelling Up, Housing and Communities team because it ostensibly relates to a technical planning matter. However, as the debate has made abundantly clear, the specific issue we are considering touches on a far broader range of concerns. As hon. Members have alluded to, when we weigh in our minds the case for specific measures such as swift bricks, context is everything. It is for that reason that Labour starts by recognising that the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, with analysis from the Natural History Museum suggesting that with an average of only 53% of our biodiversity left, the UK is in the bottom 10% of the world and the last in the G7 when it comes to the state of ecosystem biodiversity. It is unarguable that more must be done to protect and enhance our natural environment.

Labour fully appreciates how sharply breeding swift numbers across the country have declined over recent decades—as hon. Members have mentioned, they are

now on the red list of birds of conservation concern in the UK. The precise reasons for the rapid decline of the species are complex. Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), have alluded to some of them, but the loss of available nesting sites, largely through home renovation, insulation and demolition without sufficient alternatives being created, is undoubtedly a significant contributory factor. In our view, it is essential that as part of efforts to increase biodiversity net gain, we drive up rates of swift brick installation in new build properties—not only in houses but, quite rightly, in other public buildings across the whole of England.

The question is therefore not whether the Government need to do more to halt and reverse the decline of the swift population in the UK, or whether swift bricks would make a significant difference to swift numbers and other red-listed species. This tension has featured throughout the debate. The question is rather whether it is necessary, in order to boost swift numbers in the UK, to mandate the incorporation of swift bricks into all new build properties, as opposed to taking steps to better encourage and incentivise their roll-out.

Our instinct when it comes to achieving biodiversity net gain, including the specific 10% BNG target in all new developments that will apply from November this year, is to allow for maximum local discretion. It is local communities and their representatives that are best placed to determine what specific measures are appropriate on any given development site. As such, we certainly have a degree of sympathy with the Government's position that local authorities and developers should not be compelled to include swift bricks in every single housing unit that they respectively authorise or construct.

However—there definitely is a “however”—we are deeply concerned about current swift brick installation rates. To the best of my knowledge, no agreed estimate of the total number of swift bricks needed to restore the swift numbers lost over recent decades exists, although I know that some people have made estimates. But there is little doubt that the numbers currently being incorporated into new buildings each year are lower than they need to be if we are to address the decline of swift numbers in the UK. That is not to overlook the tangible progress that has been, and is being, made in various parts of the country. We appreciate that many local planning authorities and communities have already included specific provisions relating to swift bricks in their local development and neighbourhood plans and associated supplementary guidance. We recognise that many new residential developments across England are incorporating large numbers of swift bricks.

However, it is undeniably the case that those incentives remain the exception rather than the norm—not least because, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), swift bricks and other species-based features are not explicitly included within the metric for calculating biodiversity net gain. The result is that swift brick coverage across the country, estimated at fewer than 20,000, remains far too limited at present.

Labour therefore takes the view that current national planning policy and guidance on the matter, which essentially amounts to listing swift bricks as one of the many small features that can measurably increase

biodiversity and recommending them as part of best practice local design guides and codes, is insufficiently prescriptive. Although we do not believe that local discretion should be overridden lightly, we intend to reflect carefully on the arguments made in favour of making swift bricks mandatory in every new home built in England, and we certainly do not rule out such a measure in the future.

However, as things stand, we are absolutely convinced that there is a robust case for the Government to consider revising existing national planning policy and guidance in this area, at least to create a presumption in favour of incorporating swift brick provisions within local development and neighbourhood plans and associated guidance. Under such an arrangement, and with swift bricks properly scored on the BNG metric system, the onus would at least be on local authorities and developers to justify not installing swift bricks in each instance across specific sites.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman seems to be making life so much more difficult for himself and for all of us. I honestly could not believe my ears when I heard him basically saying that he would not—yet, at least—support the position that swift bricks should be mandatory. It would save so much time rather than putting in place all these extra hoops. We know that this is urgent. We know that having a swift brick can do no harm even if a swift does not use it. We know that starlings might, or sparrows. I really do not understand where his reluctance is coming from.

Matthew Pennycook: I understand the hon. Lady's point, but let me be clear—I hope I was clear enough: we certainly do not rule out mandation as a step in the future. As I said, my reluctance stems from the fact that our instinct when it comes to achieving biodiversity net gain is to allow for local discretion, and we do not think that should be overridden lightly.

Secondly—and I have heard some compelling arguments in the debate on this point—I want to be absolutely convinced on a practical level that there are no sites in buildings that will not be suitable for swift bricks, in the way that a mandatory system would not account for. That is why we think it is better to at least start in the way I have described. I take issue with the hon. Lady on the timeline. We could make both changes relatively easily; the NPPF is currently being consulted on, and the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is stuck in the other place. We think it might be better to start, as a first step, by incorporating into national policy and guidance that presumption in favour of swift bricks, with a mandatory approach in reserve.

Robert Courts: I want to comment on the hon. Gentleman's reservation about a mandatory target. I understand where he is coming from. In my own speech, I accepted that there will be some places where, because of the nature of nests that swifts like to use, mandation might not be appropriate. Could we not deal with that by way of guidance that would ensure that the impetus was there for this cheap, quick, easy step, while also ensuring that it was not wasted in certain circumstances?

Matthew Pennycook: That is a reasonable point, which I will certainly take away and look at. Given the understandable questions put to me about mandation, I honestly do not think that we are too far apart when it

comes to what I am talking about. We are talking about essentially amending national planning policy and guidance to make it a presumption that swift bricks are installed in every development and building unless a local authority or developer can justify an exemption being made. As I said previously to hon. Members, we will go away and consider; this is the first time that the House has debated this issue. We will go away and carefully consider whether we will require a move to a mandatory system in the near future if no rapid progress is made. As a first step, we are certainly convinced that the Government should do that.

In the time left to me, I will put a couple of questions to the Minister, which I hope she can address. First, as a number of hon. Members have said, it would be useful to know whether her Department has engaged, in the light of this debate—or at least intends to engage following it—with colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the specific issue of whether swift brick installation should be scored in the BNG metric. We really cannot understand why it is not, and there is a strong case for doing it.

Secondly, has the Minister's Department or the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs produced an estimate of the number of swift bricks required to restore breeding swift numbers across the country? I do not know whether other hon. Members found that to be an issue in preparing for the debate—I certainly did—but there are no reliable estimates. Local conservation groups have made them, and people out there in the country have had a go at what they might be. Such estimates would be useful when contemplating whether we need a mandatory system or a presumption in favour—to know precisely the metric we aim to get to across England. Can the Minister respond to that question?

Thirdly, do the Government agree with the Opposition that swift brick installation rates are lower than they need to be to address the decline of swift numbers in the UK? Lastly, if the Government agree that current installation rates are too low but they believe that a mandatory approach remains inappropriate, do they at least accept that existing national planning policy and guidance is, as I have argued, insufficiently prescriptive to increase coverage at the speed required? Will they consider revising it accordingly?

5.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Dehenna Davison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I will do my best to address all the points raised; if I miss any, I will follow up in writing following the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) on securing the debate, and I thank all hon. Members here for their valuable contributions.

We have received in-depth aviation know-how from a former aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts); incredibly informed views on the planning process from a former planning Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse); and some wonderful anecdotes and poetry about swifts. Some of my favourite memories of nature are sitting out in the early morning, watching them swoop and dive and dance. It is one of the most

[Dehenna Davison]

beautiful things that is so pure about swifts as a species. One of the great things about this debate is that we are all united in wanting to improve the population of swifts across the UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South referred to them as urban boy racers. I appreciated that; they certainly feel the need for speed when we watch them.

Before I address the points raised, I will make it clear that the Government greatly welcome actions by developers that contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment. We recognise the importance of protecting priority species, which is why our national planning policy framework establishes that opportunities to improve biodiversity in and around developments should be integrated as part of their design. That consideration is especially essential when it could secure measurable net gains for biodiversity. That is why it is so encouraging to see design features such as swift bricks in new builds to provide nesting facilities for birds included in housing plans.

In some circumstances, we support planning conditions or obligations being used to require that planning permission provides for works that will measurably increase biodiversity, just as we have seen with Brighton and Hove local planning authority. It has taken decisive action by mandating the inclusion of swift bricks on certain types of developments. I am sure that is due in no small part to the tenacious campaigning of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). I am sure many hon. Members are aware of similar actions in their constituencies, some of which have been highlighted, where specific species necessitate such measures.

In the case of swifts, action is needed—I think we are united on that. It is of great concern that a staggering 62% of these magnificent birds have disappeared from our skies over the past 26 years. So worrying is their decline that they have been added to the UK red list of birds of conservation concern, as a number of Members have highlighted. Although external factors such as adverse weather and a lack of insect food for chicks are contributing to their decline, the scarcity of suitable nesting spaces only exacerbates the issue. That is why I wholeheartedly agree that conservation efforts must continue to focus on ensuring safe nesting sites are in sufficient supply.

Furthermore, since swifts can be found throughout England, any urban or rural area with buildings can potentially provide homes for these birds, but it is worth noting that to maximise the chances of successful colonisation by swifts, it is crucial to install the bricks within certain parameters, considering aspects such as openness and height off the ground, as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney outlined. Planning practice guidance sets out the benefits of resting facilities for birds, but I take on board the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney and I will take them back to the Department.

This is a rare moment of cross-party unity. It is rare that myself and the shadow Minister agree at the Dispatch Box, but the Government also believe that we need to be cautious when it comes to mandating national planning conditions. There could be some circumstances where development proposals will not impact on bird habitats. We should not impose conditions and ensure that planning

permissions are subject to additional and unreasonable requirements to accommodate species that are not present in an area while creating financial burdens to comply with and to discharge the condition.

Caroline Lucas: I cannot believe what I am hearing. This brick costs about 25 quid—that is a tiny amount for new developments. There is no worst case scenario if one is put up but does not get used; there would be no problem, and other birds would probably use it. Can I impress upon the Minister that warm words do not get us anywhere? I am hearing too many warm words and not enough action. This is a simple thing that she could do, and I cannot believe that she is refusing to do it.

Dehenna Davison: I hope that some points further on in my speech will address the hon. Lady's point.

Kit Malthouse: I am pleased to hear the Minister's enthusiasm. The point is this: when the last revision of the NPPF came in, introduced this guidance towards biodiversity net gain and indicated things like swift bricks and hedgehog highways, there was a hope that developers would take it up. They have had several years to do so, and they have not.

In many developments, the box is ticked by putting up some wooden boxes here and there that will deteriorate over three or four years and then be gone. The point about the swift brick is that it is permanent. It cannot go. It does not weather or deteriorate. After seven or eight years, my wooden boxes are already looking a bit ropey after the predations of the parakeets and will need to be replaced. A brick would not. That is why we are all so keen to see them mandated.

Dehenna Davison: I am incredibly grateful to my right hon. Friend. He has incredible wisdom in this field, having served in the Department and focused on planning during his time in government. He will know that we have recently consulted on the new national planning policy framework. I will come to that later on in my speech, which I hope will address some of his concerns.

It is fair to say that more research is needed on how best we monitor and improve swift populations, as outlined by the shadow Minister. I have received assurances from DEFRA and its agencies that they will monitor swift populations and assess any positive effect.

I pass on my thanks to organisations such as Swift Conservation and to local groups such as Hampshire Swifts and Save Wolverton's Swifts and Martins—I have to do that, as the sister of the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is in the Public Gallery. It would not be right not to pay tribute to those groups for their work.

The Government do not at present intend to make swift bricks compulsory in new housing, but I assure Members here today and the House that measures are being introduced across Government to protect and enhance our natural and local environment, and I will outline those now.

Hon. Members may be surprised to learn that other familiar birds, such as sparrows and starlings, which were added to the UK red list 21 years ago, have remained on that list since. To tackle that, we are placing greater emphasis on implementing a range of policies that intersect with planning to achieve better outcomes for

habitats and species in England, and we have already made great progress. Just last month, the Government announced funding of £14 million to support 48 authorities in England responsible for developing local nature recovery strategies. Those identify and outline ways to enhance or recover the existing or potential species in the respective areas. Their importance cannot be overstated.

Kerry McCarthy: Does the Minister not accept that nature recovery strategies are aimed at birds that would nest in trees, hedgerows and so on, which is not relevant to the swift debate, because we are talking about houses with bricks in?

Dehenna Davison: The hon. Lady makes a reasonable point. I am just outlining some of the wider work to help not just the swift community, but the wider bird population across the UK.

Robert Courts: The Government are doing a lot, but the point that we are seeking to make is that they are not doing anything to help swifts. I made my comments, at some length, to explain why swifts are different. They will not be impacted by the measures being taken—laudably—in other areas. The swift brick is needed, because it is niche to swifts.

Dehenna Davison: I appreciate that, and I again thank my hon. Friend for his valuable contribution—specifically the point on ensuring that swift bricks are installed at the right height, which is vital to them being fit for purpose.

Robert Courts: The Minister has touched on the right point, but that can be dealt with by the guidance. If there is a mandate to require swift bricks wherever possible, the guidance can be laid out afterwards on how to go out and do it.

Dehenna Davison: Again, I appreciate that, and I will take it back to the Department following our debate.

In addition to the strategies I outlined, a range of cross-Government measures will support the needs of nature more widely in local planning, including mandatory biodiversity net gain, which sees most types of new development required to deliver improvements of 10% or more in biodiversity. Work is ongoing with DEFRA to finalise the regulations, but we are confident that that update to the planning process will have positive outcomes for biodiversity.

The hon. Member for Bristol East asked specifically about that issue. As she outlined, DEFRA has committed to keeping species features such as swift bricks and bat and bird boxes under review. It is also committed to updating its biodiversity metric every three to five years, which will provide further opportunities for change and innovations to be considered.

Another measure that is in place to support the needs of nature in local planning is the green infrastructure framework, published in January 2023. The framework helps local planning authorities and developers to meet the national planning policy framework requirements to consider green infrastructure in local plans and new developments. The framework's "Green Infrastructure Planning and Design Guide" is a helpful resource, which already advocates using British Standard 42021,

calling for integral nest boxes to be installed in new developments. Furthermore, the requirement to consider green infrastructure in local plans is embedded in the national model design code, which provides guidance for local planning authorities on setting clear design standards through design codes and already refers to the green infrastructure framework, reinforcing the importance of the measures it outlines.

As we consider the implementation of a national policy, we need to reflect on its practicalities and whether planning is the most appropriate mechanism to achieve the desired outcomes. There is no denying—it has not been denied in this Chamber—that the planning process can be confusing and outdated for users. That is why our Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill is crucial to deliver changes to planning policy to address that complexity, including modernising it, increasing flexibility and regulating pre-application engagement with communities.

The changes that we want to make to the planning system will see a more consistent, streamlined and digitally enabled approach to the way planning applications are made. They will be proportionate to the scale and nature of the development proposed, to ensure faster and better decision making.

I must make it clear that the Government recognise the fact that many local planning authorities, as well as the wider planning sector, are facing capacity and capability challenges, which is why we have developed a programme of support, working with partners across the planning sector, to ensure that local planning authorities have the skills and capacity they need, both now and in the future. To that end, we are concerned that the introduction of mandatory conditions may impose an additional burden on all local planning authorities to enforce breaches of conditions. As legislators, we need to be mindful of the potential unintended consequences of introducing a national policy.

Caroline Nokes: The Minister will know that my constituency neighbour, our right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), shares a local authority with me. Test Valley Borough Council already requires a long list of specifications when a planning application is granted, including what type of brick and roofing material will be used and what the windows will look like. Mandating a standard brick per dwelling does not seem very complicated to me.

Dehenna Davison: I have heard my right hon. Friend loud and clear, but I hope she will recognise my wider point about not wanting to add unnecessary additional complexity to a service that already faces a great deal of it.

Consultations such as the one on the national planning policy framework in December 2022 are invaluable sources of information, as mentioned by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan). We are currently analysing the responses to the consultation, which included answers about how national policy could be strengthened through small-scale nature interventions—for example, swift bricks—and a Government response will be provided in due course.

We also used the consultation as an opportunity to outline our commitment to a wider national planning policy review, which will align with the Levelling-up

[Dehenna Davison]

and Regeneration Bill receiving Royal Assent, and will ensure that the planning system capitalises on all opportunities to support the environment, address climate change and, of course, level up the economy. In the review, we have already committed to exploring how we can incorporate nature into development through better planning for green infrastructure and nature-friendly buildings. I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members will appreciate that we cannot pre-empt the findings of the review, so we would not want to introduce a national compulsory planning policy until it has been concluded, but we remain conscious of the plight of our swift population and the potential benefits that mandatory swift bricks could have.

Before I close, I reiterate that the Government are committed to protecting and enhancing our natural and local environment. Through our planning changes and cross-Government working, we are pursuing a fair and balanced approach to achieve better outcomes for biodiversity. Our policy interventions will empower local areas to adopt a targeted approach in reversing the decline of swifts, based on local opportunities. Local planning authorities have the power to adopt policies locally that protect species, and it is important that that is done in a holistic way.

Kit Malthouse: Before the Minister finishes, could she confirm to us that she is not saying no to introducing mandatory swift bricks? I understand that she is a Minister in a Department and that collective decision making has to be gone through, but will she go away and have a think about it? In doing so, will she consider two things? First, she should have a look at the wooden boxes that developers may have put up three or four years ago, get a sense of whether they are all still there and consider their permanence. Secondly, I understand that she has given notice that she will not be standing at the next general election but, in a small way, she may be able to leave her mark for the future. If she said yes, we would all be happy to call it the Davison brick, and she would be able to gaze at the swifts with some joy in the future and see the part that she had played in their success.

Dehenna Davison: I am incredibly grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention but, just to confirm, it is not something that is being considered by Government at the moment. As I said, in the review of the national planning policy framework there are opportunities to feed in, and I would encourage all Members here and all interested campaigners to feed into that consultation.

Kerry McCarthy: The problem is that that review is absolutely massive—it covers a huge range of things. The reason we are having the debate today is to try to flag that this issue needs a very specific response. How can the Minister assure us that, when it comes to the consultation, this does not get lost among everything else?

Dehenna Davison: Given the tenacity of the Members present and the incredible campaigning of groups such as those sitting in the Public Gallery today, I am confident that the issue will remain on the radar of both my Department and the wider Government.

Robert Courts: I am grateful to the Minister for taking another intervention. I add my voice to those we have just heard: this issue is a way for her to make a real mark on nature. It could be something that she could forever say she had done that had helped the future. I hope the Department will forgive me, but I feel that it is quite a niche subject, and perhaps one that the Department does not understand in the way it ought to in terms of how it could help. Would the Minister agree to meet a cross-party group of people who care about this issue and who will come and plead the case again? Maybe then she will be able to say that she will think again.

Dehenna Davison: My hon. Friend pre-empted my final sentence. I was going to offer to meet interested Members from across the House and interested campaigners from across the country to discuss the issue further. I recognise that it has provoked hearts and minds, and it is important that we get it right to stop the decline of swift populations.

Finally, I assure hon. Members that we want to build a future where swifts can thrive and soar high in our skies, bringing joy to all who, like myself, witness their graceful flight. I am grateful to all hon. Members for taking such a close interest today.

6.1 pm

Matt Vickers: I thank the Minister for her comments. She has heard the call, and I hope she will reflect the arguments and the passion to the Government. It has been great to see such passion for swifts; in fact, hon. Members have put their words into action and installed many swift bricks in their own homes.

As MPs, we debate measures to do with protecting our natural environment, which all too often come down to arguments around costs and consequences. These tiny bricks come with tiny costs but can have a huge impact on a treasured species. It seems like a no-brainer. I am confident that, given the passion of Hannah, the campaigners and so many MPs, the campaign will not end here.

The debate has raised awareness and driven huge press coverage. Like many others, I have lost count of how many times I have had to explain to people what a swift brick is. Congratulations to everybody involved, and congratulations to Hannah on a fantastic petition campaign—keep going! I am in touch with my local council about what we can do in our area with these fantastic bricks, and I am sure that, as a result of the debate today, many others will be in touch with theirs too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 626737, relating to the use of swift bricks in new housing.

6.2 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 10 July 2023

EDUCATION

Early Years Funding

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education, Baroness Barran, has made the following statement.

Today I am confirming the distribution of £204 million of additional funding for the early years entitlements in 2023-24 via a new Early Years Supplementary Grant (EYSG); and the hourly funding rates that each local authority will therefore receive from September 2023.

At the 2023 spring Budget the Chancellor announced an increase to the funding for the existing early years entitlements for two, three and four year-olds of £204 million from this September, and £288 million in 2024-25. This is for local authorities to increase the rates paid to childcare providers.

For 2023-24, the additional £204 million will be distributed to local authorities through a new standalone top-up grant called the Early Years Supplementary Grant (EYSG). Given that the funding increase is coming in mid-way through the financial year, providing this funding through a stand-alone grant will help reduce complexity and support local authorities to pass the additional funding on to providers from September in a timely manner.

This additional funding through the EYSG, coming on top of local authorities' existing allocations, will effectively increase average funding rates by 32% for the current two-year-old entitlement, and 6.3% for the three and four-year-old entitlements, from September.

The EYSG rate for two-year-olds is, on average, £1.95 per hour—this means that the national average two-year-old funding that local authorities will receive will increase from the current £6 per hour to £7.95.

The EYSG rate for three and four-year-olds is, on average, 33p per hour—similarly, the national average three and four-year-old hourly rate received by local authorities will increase from £5.29 to £5.62. The minimum funding floor for the three and four-year-old funding hourly rate will increase from £4.87 to £5.20. All local authorities will see at least a 1% increase, and up to a maximum of 10%.

We will also shortly be launching a consultation on our proposed approach to distributing the funding for the new entitlements for working parents of children aged nine months to two years, to local authorities in 2024-25, along with the accompanying local rules for local authorities to follow when passing on this funding to providers. I will update the House accordingly.

Alongside this additional funding, I am also announcing that £12 million of funding will be made available to local authorities this financial year, to support them prepare to roll out the new early years entitlements. We will announce further information, including the allocations methodology being used, in the autumn.

Separately, the Government have today set plans in motion to deliver their ambition for all parents of primary school aged children to access childcare in their local area between 8 am and 6 pm. The 16 local authorities, from Barnsley to Wiltshire, have been selected to work alongside the Government to develop plans for this universal provision, with some of these areas expected to be amongst the first to start delivery, as soon as summer 2024.

Further details and guidance on the Early Years Supplementary Grant and funding rates will be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS923]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Canal & River Trust: Future Funding

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Today, I am notifying Parliament of our intention to provide additional grant funding from 2027 to the Canal & River Trust. The trust is a charity responsible for 2,000 miles of waterways and associated historic industrial infrastructure in England and Wales. The trust is responsible for maintaining navigability and safety of its waterways including reservoirs, embankments and other infrastructure.

An open and well-maintained Canal & River Trust inland waterways network delivers broad benefits aligned to our nation's priorities. In January 2023 the Government published our ambitious environmental improvement plan (EIP). The Government recognise that the Canal & River Trust has an important role to play in contributing to the EIP, alongside other Government priorities.

Since it was first created in 2012, as a private charity independent of Government, we have been very clear that the trust would have to increasingly move towards alternative sources of funding. We have been discussing this with the charity for some time and have been offering support on how it can increase income from other sources, alongside continued Government funding, which countless charities across the country do very effectively.

While there is no obligation for Government to fund the Canal & River Trust beyond 2027 I can confirm that, subject to certain conditions being met, Government will offer a new long-term funding package of over £400 million to the trust. To date we have awarded it £550 million funding and, with this further commitment, are now supporting the trust with a further total £590 million between now and 2037—a significant sum of money and a sign of the importance that we place on our inland waterways.

I look forward to continued enjoyment of our local waterways.

[HCWS924]

JUSTICE

Rape Review Action Plan and Operation Soteria

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman) and I are pleased to announce that the Government are today publishing a progress report two years on from the publication of the end-to-end rape review action plan. This is the fourth six-monthly progress report on implementation, and demonstrates the Government's ongoing commitment to be transparent and accountable to the public on our progress in delivering the ambitions of the Rape Review.

The data in the report provides clear evidence of progress to drive up police referrals, charge rates, and Crown court receipts. We are making sustained progress towards the rape review's ambition to return volumes of cases being referred to the police, charged by the Crown Prosecution Service, and going to court, to at least 2016 levels. It is well documented that the charge rate and volume of convictions for adult rape dropped drastically after 2016 due to a range of factors, not least a lack of join-up across the system, and the criminal justice system overcorrecting following a small number of high-profile disclosure failures. A return to 2016 levels is ambitious, marking a year where adult rape convictions were 30% higher than in 2010. The latest data shows that we have hit two of our ambitions already, and remain on track to hit the other:

Adult rape cases referred by the police to the CPS—for either early advice or a charging decision—continue to increase, with 1,079 total police referrals in the fourth quarter of 2022, exceeding our ambition of 766 and up by 134% from the quarterly average in 2019, when the Rape Review was commissioned.

Adult rape cases charged by the CPS have been increasing, with 472 suspects charged between October and December 2022, close to our ambition of 538 and up by 93% from the quarterly average in 2019.

The number of adult rape Crown Court receipts continued to increase in the first quarter of 2023 with 605 Crown Court receipts, exceeding our ambition of 553. It is also up by 162% from the quarterly average in 2019.

And despite the barristers' strike impacting court action in 2022, adult rape prosecutions continue to rise, up 44% in the last calendar year, almost double what was achieved during 2019, and higher than the volume achieved in 2010.

Key achievements over the last six months include:

Introducing the landmark Victims and Prisoners Bill to Parliament in March, bringing forward measures to better serve victims and the public.

Legislating through the Victims and Prisoners Bill to ensure requests for third party material, such as therapy notes, or medical, educational and social service records are necessary and proportionate.

Recruiting 20,000 additional police officers, having brought in a net increase of 20,951 officers across England and Wales since the launch of the recruitment campaign in 2019, ensuring the police have the resources available to dedicate capacity to priority issues such as rape.

A second round of Government funded procurement—with a value of £4.2 million—of technical capability to retrieve digital evidence—when it is the least intrusive means to do

so—from mobile phones at a time and place convenient to the victim has been completed and is being deployed to forces.

The Law Commission publishing its consultation into the use of evidence in trials involving sexual offences.

Today we are also announcing that through the specialist sexual violence support project, we will ensure that any adult rape victim at Newcastle, Leeds or Snaresbrook Crown court who needs it has the option to remotely observe the sentencing hearing for their case, through video link, subject to judicial agreement. This will give victims the opportunity to see justice done without the distressing experience of attending court alongside the defendant's family or supporters. This builds on other work to improve the victim experience at court, including legislation to permit the remote observation of sentencing hearings and allowing victims to pre-record their evidence and spare them the trauma of attending court in person.

Operation Soteria is an ambitious joint Home Office and CPS programme to transform the way that rape investigations and prosecutions are handled and progressed, with a focus on investigating the suspect rather than the victim. Through close collaboration between frontline policing, prosecutors and academics, the programme has developed new national operating models for the investigation and prosecution of rape and serious sexual offences. All police forces in England and Wales have committed to implement this new approach and will be supported to do so by the Home Office, the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs' Council, who are establishing a joint unit to oversee implementation and monitor progress. In addition, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue has been commissioned to conduct a thematic inspection on forces' implementation of the model.

While strong progress has been made, we made clear in our last progress report that the rape review action plan is a start and must remain dynamic and continue responding to the challenges that victims face. We recognise there is still more to do, which is why we are setting out our action plan until December 2024, ensuring we continue to deliver improvements to the criminal justice system's response to rape.

These publications form part of the Government's ambition to ensure access to justice, improve the experience of victims and make our society safer for everyone.

[HCWS922]

Petition

Monday 10 July 2023

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

BUPA Dental Care York Facility

The petition of residents of York and North Yorkshire,

Declares that the closure of BUPA Dental Care York facility on 30 June 2023 at 5 Station Business Park, Holgate Park Drive, will affect the dental care of 6,200 patients including 4,200 NHS patients which receive an excellent level of dental care in a friendly and supportive environment; further notes that this closure has been met with opposition by the residents of the area; further notes that current waiting lists for NHS dentistry in York have risen to 7 years.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to call on BUPA to stop the closure of the BUPA Dental Care York facility and provide adequate dental care to residents in the area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rachael Maskell, *Official Report*, 22 June 2023; Vol. 734, c. 1039.]

[P002840]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien):

The National Health Service (NHS) contracts with independent dental providers, such as Bupa, to deliver NHS dental treatment in primary care settings. This means that providers can terminate their contracts within the required terms of the contract, including a notice

period. Bupa provided NHS England with notice of closures in accordance with the terms of their contractual agreement.

Following Bupa's notice of closures, NHS England and integrated care boards across England worked with Bupa to ensure that patients continue to have access to NHS dental care. Commissioners have worked closely with all affected practices, who were required to use their best endeavours to complete patients' treatments prior to close-down.

On the 6 and 15 June, as the Minister responsible for primary care and public health, I met representatives from the North Yorkshire and Humber integrated commissioning board and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) to discuss specific arrangements for York following the closure of Bupa Dental Care York facility on 30 June. They have been able to reallocate contracted provision to other local practices and continue to work on ensuring good levels of access for the area.

The Government are grateful for the services provided to NHS dental patients by Bupa Dental Care in York, and also acknowledge the challenges that people are still facing in accessing an NHS dentist in areas such as York.

The Government are taking significant steps to improve access for dental patients across the country. We will shortly be publishing a plan to outline reforms aimed at making NHS dental work more attractive to dental practices and improving access particularly for new patients. This will build upon the package of reforms we introduced last summer and the long term workforce plan for the NHS which was published on 30 June.

NHS dentists are required to keep their NHS.UK profiles up to date so that patients can find a dentist more easily. Patients can approach any NHS dental practice and request care regardless of geographical location. If a patient's dental condition changes or deteriorates, they are advised to contact NHS 111 for assistance.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 10 July 2023

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Industry: Financial Resilience

The following are extracts from the urgent question on Water Industry: Financial Resilience on 28 June 2023.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents are hugely worried about reports of Thames Water being on the brink and what that could mean for their bills. Thames Water has been managed appallingly: leaks have not been dealt with, sewage has been continually dumped and the former chief executive officer Sarah Bentley needed to be asked to forgo her bonus. All the while, the Government have been missing in action. Why are the Government yet again running to catch up—nothing in the Minister's statement gives confidence that they have a grip—with our constituents paying the price?

Rebecca Pow: Where water companies underperform and do not meet their targets, a process is in place whereby basically they have to credit the money back to their customers. Last year, £143 million was credited back in that respect. So the regulator does have the tools to do that. It has tightened up so many of its measures, all of which will affect all the water companies. *[Official Report, 28 June 2023, Vol. 735, c. 286.]*

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra).

The correct response should have been:

Rebecca Pow: Where water companies underperform and do not meet their targets, a process is in place whereby basically they have to credit the money back to their customers. Last year, **£132 million** was credited back in that respect. So the regulator does have the tools to do that. It has tightened up so many of its measures, all of which will affect all the water companies.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): When they were privatised, water companies had all the debt written off, so they started with zero. Since then, they have borrowed £53 billion, much of which has been used to help pay £72 billion in dividends. The investment has been made by borrowing and putting it on to customers' bills. Now, the ratings agency S&P has negative outlooks for two thirds of the UK water companies it rates, because they are over-leveraged and took out too much debt in an era of low interest, which they now have to pay back. This is not a triumph but a huge problem for the resilience of our water industry. What will the Minister do when water companies start falling over?

Rebecca Pow: For information, Thames Water itself has not paid any dividends for the last six years. Ofwat will rightly hold companies to account when they do

not clearly demonstrate the link between dividends and performance. We made that possible through the landmark Environment Act.

[Official Report, 28 June 2023, Vol. 735, c. 288.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle).

The correct response should have been:

Rebecca Pow: For information, Thames Water itself has **stated that it has** not paid any dividends to **shareholders** for the last six years. Ofwat will rightly hold companies to account when they do not clearly demonstrate the link between dividends and performance. We made that possible through the landmark Environment Act.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Draft Pensions Dashboards (Amendment) Regulations 2023

The following is an extract from the debate on the Draft Pensions Dashboards (Amendment) Regulations 2023 in the First Delegated Legislation Committee on Monday 3 July 2023.

Laura Trott: We expect that the connection timetable in guidance will continue to prioritise large schemes with the greatest number of members for the first connections. It is also important to note that the dashboards' available point—the point at which dashboards will be available for widespread public use—could happen before the October 2026 connection deadline in the regulations. The connection timetable set out in guidance will require scheme trustees or managers to have regard to the guidance; not doing so would be a breach of the regulations. *[Official Report, First Delegated Legislation Committee, 3 July 2023, Vol. 735, c. 4.]*

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott):

An error has been identified in my opening speech.

The correct information should have been:

Laura Trott: We expect that the connection timetable in guidance will continue to prioritise large schemes with the greatest number of members for the first connections. It is also important to note that the dashboards' available point—the point at which dashboards will be available for widespread public use—could happen before the October 2026 connection deadline in the regulations. **Trustees and managers will be expected to demonstrate how they have had regard to the timeline set out in guidance;** not doing so would be a breach of the regulations.

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The following is an extract from the fifth sitting of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee on 20 June 2023.

Paul Scully: As the hon. Member for Pontypridd rightly says, and we have said all the way through, technology and digital markets move really quickly. That is why we want to make sure that decisions are out

of the door as quickly as possible, so that people can see what is happening as soon as possible. The decisions will go to the appropriate persons as described, which are relevant third parties and the SMS firms themselves.

[Official Report, Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee, 20 June 2023, Vol. 734, c. 132.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

An error has been identified in my contribution. The correct information should have been:

Paul Scully: As the hon. Member for Pontypridd rightly says, and we have said all the way through, technology and digital markets move really quickly. That is why we want to make sure that decisions are out of the door as quickly as possible, so that people can see what is happening as soon as possible. **Consultations on decisions will be brought to the attention** of appropriate persons as described, which are relevant third parties and the SMS firms themselves.

The following is an extract from the seventh sitting of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee on 22 June 2023.

Paul Scully: Clearly, we have safeguards in the process there, so the Secretary of State will need to consult the CMA. This is not just an isolated decision-making process; the CMA has expertise in this area, but it will be for the Secretary of State to focus on the decision. The CMA will be able to provide the expert advice, ensuring that amendments can correctly reflect the changing landscape, **and Parliament will clearly need to approve any amendment.**

[Official Report, Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee, 22 June 2023, Vol. 734, c. 181.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

An error has been identified in my contribution. The correct information should have been:

Paul Scully: Clearly, we have safeguards in the process there, so the Secretary of State will need to consult the CMA. This is not just an isolated decision-making process; the CMA has expertise in this area, but it will be for the Secretary of State to focus on the decision. The CMA will be able to provide the expert advice, ensuring that amendments can correctly reflect the changing landscape.

The following is an extract from the ninth sitting of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee on 27 June 2023.

Paul Scully: Notices will be made public, and information about the groups will be reported online.

[Official Report, Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee, 27 June 2023, Vol. 735, c. 220.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

An error has been identified in my contribution. The correct information should have been:

Paul Scully: Notices will be made public, and information about the groups will be **able to be** reported online **by the CMA.**

The following is an extract from the 10th sitting of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee on 27 June 2023.

Paul Scully: On microbusinesses and small business, this is effectively a standard definition that, yes, does exclude microbusinesses, because it replicates provisions in the Enterprise Act. The obvious question then is, “How do microbusinesses and small businesses get any redress in these examples?” but business protection regulations would cover that, and they are not within the scope of this change. However, any of the changes that the hon. Lady requested would largely come under the affirmative procedure.

[Official Report, Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee, 27 June 2023, Vol. 735, c. 242.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

An error has been identified in my contribution. The correct information should have been:

Paul Scully: On microbusinesses and small business, this is effectively a standard definition that, yes, does exclude microbusinesses, because it replicates provisions in the Enterprise Act. The obvious question then is, “How do microbusinesses and small businesses get any redress in these examples?” but business protection regulations would cover that, and they are not within the scope of this change. However, any of the changes **to schedules 13 and 14 as requested by** the hon. Lady **would be by regulations** under the affirmative procedure.

The following is an extract from the 10th sitting of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee on 27 June 2023.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady asked about the possibility of multiple enforcers in process at the same time. In effect, we are restating the existing arrangements, which have been working. They work with the CMA as the gatekeeper, so the CMA would have to be notified when action has been taken—it can filter anything going on in that regard—and it would have to co-ordinate the approach.

[Official Report, Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee, 27 June 2023, Vol. 735, c. 249.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

An error has been identified in my contribution. The correct information should have been:

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady asked about the possibility of multiple enforcers in process at the same time. In effect, we are restating the existing arrangements, which have been working. They work with the CMA as the gatekeeper, so the CMA would have to be notified **before** action has been taken—it can filter anything going on in that regard—and it would have to co-ordinate the approach.

The following is an extract from the 10th sitting of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee on 27 June 2023.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady also asked about the CMA being able to enforce and why private enforcers did not have the same powers. Only the CMA may impose penalties. Private enforcers may seek a penalty in court, but the CMA is the only body able to issue penalties directly.

[Official Report, Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Public Bill Committee, 27 June 2023, Vol. 735, c. 250.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully).

An error has been identified in my contribution. The correct information should have been:

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady also asked about the CMA being able to enforce and why private enforcers did not have the same powers. Only the CMA may impose penalties. **Public** enforcers may seek a penalty in court, but the CMA is the only body able to issue penalties directly.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following are extracts from Prime Minister's questions on 7 June 2023.

Angela Rayner: I know that for the last couple of years the Deputy Prime Minister has been trying to prep Prime Ministers for PMQs, but these punchlines are dire—he really needs to go back to school himself. Speaking of school, thousands of children are missing from school; absence has nearly doubled since before the pandemic. The Prime Minister says that he has maxed out on his support for school pupils, but why did the Government abandon their plans for a register of missing children?

The Deputy Prime Minister: On the specifics of the right hon. Lady's question, that is not the case: we continue to keep the policy under review. I am very proud of this Government's record on funding and support for schools: £4 billion more this year, £4 billion next year, and the result of all that investment is that we have the highest standards of reading in the entire western world. What a contrast from when the Labour party was in power.

[Official Report, 7 June 2023, Vol. 733, c. 725.]

Letter of correction from the Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden):

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: On the specifics of the right hon. Lady's question, that is not the case: we continue to keep the policy under review. I am very proud of this Government's record on funding and support for schools—**£4 billion over the next two years**, and the result of all that investment is that we have the highest standards of reading in the entire western world. What a contrast from when the Labour party was in power.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): In spite of Government spin to the contrary, the backlog of undetermined initial asylum claims has risen even since December from 160,000 to 170,000-plus. Caseworker numbers are down, and returns are still down. So will the Deputy Prime Minister agree to meet me to hear my constituents' concerns about the Home Secretary's plans to commandeer yet another hotel, the Stradey Park in the village of Furnace, and explain what more he will do to speed up clearing the backlog so as to return people to safe countries, settle genuine refugees and avoid the need to use the Stradey Park hotel?

The Deputy Prime Minister: This Government will take whatever action is necessary both to clear the backlog and to stop the boats. Actually, as the hon. Member may have heard from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, small boat arrivals to the UK are down 20% this year, our French deal has prevented 33,000 illegal crossings this year, Albanian arrivals are down 90%, we have removed 1,800 Albanians, we have increased the number of illegal working raids and the legacy asylum backlog is now down 20%.

[Official Report, 7 June 2023, Vol. 733, c. 730.]

Letter of correction from the Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith).

The correct response should have been:

The Deputy Prime Minister: This Government will take whatever action is necessary both to clear the backlog and to stop the boats. Actually, as the hon. Member may have heard from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, small boat arrivals to the UK are down 20% this year, our French deal prevented 33,000 illegal crossings **last year**, Albanian arrivals are down 90%, we have removed 1,800 Albanians, we have increased the number of illegal working raids and the legacy asylum backlog is now down 20%.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 10 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES	1	LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES—	
Affordable Housing	9	<i>continued</i>	
Antisemitism	1	Local Authorities: Long-term Funding	6
Business Liquidation: Costs to Local Authorities ..	4	Local Authority Funding	5
Community Ownership Fund	4	Renters (Reform) Bill	9
Devolution in England	8	Rough Sleeping	16
House Building	12	Strength of the Union	10
Levelling Up	2	Topical Questions	17

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 10 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	1WS	JUSTICE	2WS
Early Years Funding	1WS	Rape Review Action Plan and Operation Soteria...	2WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	2WS		
Canal & River Trust: Future Funding	2WS		

PETITION

Monday 10 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	1P		
BUPA Dental Care York Facility	1P		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Monday 10 July 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	1MC	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY..	2MC
Water Industry: Financial Resilience	1MC		
PRIME MINISTER	5MC	WORK AND PENSIONS	2MC
Engagements	5MC	Draft Pensions Dashboards (Amendment)	
		Regulations2023	2MC

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**not later than
Monday 17 July 2023**

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CONTENTS

Monday 10 July 2023

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Rape and Sexual Violence: Criminal Justice Response [Col. 23]
Statement—(Miss Sarah Dines)

Privileges Committee Special Report [Col. 33]
Motion—(Penny Mordaunt)—agreed to

Electronic Trade Documents Bill [*Lords*] [Col. 93]
As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Northern Ireland Budget (No. 2) Bill [Col. 101]
Motion for Second Reading—(Steve Baker)—agreed to

Police Stations [Col. 145]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
New Housing: Swift Bricks [Col. 1WH]
E-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observation

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 1MC]
