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HOUSE OF COMMONS
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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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House of Commons

Thursday 7 September 2023

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Order, 5 September, and Standing Order No. 3).

Deputy Speaker's Statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I wish to inform the House that Mr Speaker has received a letter from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant), giving notice of his resignation as Chair of the Committee on Standards. The Chair is now vacant. The election for a new Chair will take place to the same timetable as that for the Chairs of the Business and Trade Committee and the Petitions Committee, which Mr Speaker announced yesterday.

Nominations will close at noon on Tuesday 17 October. Nomination forms will be available from the Vote Office, the Table Office and the Public Bill Office. Only Members from the Labour party may be candidates in this election. If there is more than one candidate, the ballot will take place on Wednesday 18 October, between 11 am and 2.30 pm, in the Aye Division Lobby. A briefing note with more information will be made available in the Vote Office.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Resignation Honours Lists

1. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Whether he has held recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the publication of the resignation honours lists of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk and the former right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip on public trust in (a) politicians and (b) political institutions. [906243]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): It is a long-standing convention, under successive Governments, that outgoing Prime Ministers can draw up a resignation honours list. Any names proposed are subject to the usual propriety checks.

Patricia Gibson: Trust in politics has never been lower, and this has been worsened by the grubby reality that the former right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip handed out peerages to his pals and covid partygoers. The other former Prime Minister was the shortest-serving Prime Minister in history but still managed to crash the economy, and she will also enjoy the privilege of ennobling pals and cronies. Do the Cabinet Office, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet feel this is inappropriate in any way? Does the Minister think such a spectacle will help to restore trust in politics?

Alex Burghart: We discussed this at length on 22 June, when it was said that if the hon. Lady were to look at the resignation honours list of the former right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, she will see many people who conducted a great deal of public service and deserved to have that service recognised. We have not yet seen the list of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), but it is worth remembering that people who are honoured in our system have often contributed greatly to our country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before we proceed, the House may wish to join me in wishing the Minister a happy birthday.

Alex Burghart: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. What nicer way to spend one's 28th birthday? Alas, I am not 28.

Artificial Intelligence

2. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): Whether he has held recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on co-operation with international partners on responding to the potential challenges of the use of artificial intelligence. [906244]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The Government know the importance of collaborating internationally on the challenge and opportunities of AI. That is why, in the autumn, the Prime Minister will convene the first major AI summit, which will bring together major international partners and leaders in the technology to discuss the issues that confront society.

Dr Evans: It is great to hear that the international community will be coming to Bletchley Park in November to discuss the principles and core values when dealing with AI. Given that AI is moving so quickly, with the likes of ChatGPT already impacting things like the work of school kids, what more can the Government do to make sure each Department is taking full account of the impact of AI?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend asks a pertinent question. The Cabinet Office, which is home to the Government Digital Service and the Central Digital and Data Office, takes a lead role, along with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, in co-ordinating work within Government so that we can take advantage of the extraordinary opportunities AI presents and guard ourselves against potential disadvantages.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is nice to see you in the Chair first thing in the morning, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his response. Constituents all around this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland rely on employment to make ends meet and survive. Has he had discussions with international partners as to how AI will impact on people's livelihoods and jobs? That is so important.

Alex Burghart: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, as one potential risk of AI is that it displaces employment. However, across Government we are looking at the risks and opportunities. We see a future in which humans working with AI create all sorts of great new opportunities for our economy and for individuals.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me also say happy birthday to the Minister. He has just told the House that the Cabinet Office is responsible for the Government Digital Service—quite rightly. The Government could be making better use of AI to improve government services. For example, we are losing £8 billion a year to benefit fraud and error. Under this Government, we have lost £60 billion to that since 2010—that is £150 a second. Are they going to use AI to deal with benefit fraud and error, or should we assume that this is another example of how nothing works after 13 years?

Alex Burghart: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place and look forward to debating these and other issues with him in future. He will be delighted to hear that over the past three years the Government have saved billions of pounds using the latest technology—

Jonathan Ashworth No, they haven't.

Alex Burghart: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that they have. I can see he is new to the brief and he has some reading to do. *[Interruption.]* He has been moved from his previous brief to this one. He may be interested to discover that we regularly convene meetings with groups such as Evidence House and 10DS, which contain some of the finest technical experience in Government, to ensure we are taking advantage of the latest technology to make savings for taxpayers. He talks about money lost, but the money that the Government and the Treasury have saved through implementing the latest techniques is far in excess of the number he gave.

Propriety in Public Life

3. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure high standards of propriety in public life. [906245]

10. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure high standards of propriety in public life. [906252]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): As the Prime Minister set out when he first entered Downing Street, this Government will uphold the highest standards of integrity and propriety. In July we announced a wide-ranging programme of reform, acting on recommendations from Nigel Boardman, the Committee on Standards in Public Life and the Public Administration Committee.

Mohammad Yasin: We have all heard that the former Member for Mid Bedfordshire failed to speak in this House for more than a year and that her farcical resignation, which was to have "immediate effect", took nearly three months, but what about the years when there was no constituency office listed for people to make representations to? With no regard to standards in public life, it is clear that the Tories have sold my neighbouring constituency down the river. Does the Secretary of State agree that the good people of Mid Bedfordshire deserve a hard-working, full-time Labour MP such as Alistair Strathern instead?

Oliver Dowden: The people of Mid Bedfordshire deserve a hard-working Member of Parliament who lives and works in the constituency, and in Festus they will find exactly that. I have every confidence that they will return him to this House in the by-election next month.

Justin Madders: At the conclusion of Prime Minister's questions yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) made a point of order, picking up on a statement made by the Prime Minister that she described as "categorically untrue". This is about the sixth or seventh time this year that we have had to make such points of order about the Prime Minister. How can we have any confidence that we are going to get high standards in public life if this keeps happening?

Oliver Dowden: That is simply not the case. If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the exchange, he would have heard that the Prime Minister answered comprehensively every question raised by the Leader of the Opposition and demonstrated a far greater understanding of the detail of this than that demonstrated by his opposite number.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Last year, the Prime Minister said that his Government would do "everything we can" to recover covid fraud losses, yet the crony PPE VIP lane helped Tory-linked business owners over small and medium-sized businesses, meaning that £15 billion of taxpayer money was wasted on useless PPE. The Public Accounts Committee found it "unacceptable" that the Government are not prioritising recouping misused money, with only £21 million—only 2%—recovered from fraudsters. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to fulfil his Government's pledge to reclaim misused taxpayer money? Or is that, like the Prime Minister's promise of integrity and accountability, another failed vow?

Oliver Dowden: What we saw during the crisis was the Prime Minister, who was then Chancellor, acting decisively and rapidly to save the economy and millions of jobs. Since we have passed out of the covid period, we are taking action to recover fraud and error losses. As set out by my hon. Friends, in the past two years alone, we have recovered more than £3 billion. I would gently say to the hon. Lady that people in glasshouses should perhaps not throw stones, given the experience of her party's leaders being frogmarched by the police to investigate the misuse of funds by her own party.

Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests: Remit

4. **Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the remit of the independent adviser on ministerial interests. [906246]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): The Prime Minister's independent adviser on Ministers' interests, Sir Laurie Magnus, works within established and robust terms of reference, to provide impartial advice on matters relating to the ministerial code. The powers and status of the role were strengthened in 2022 and Sir Laurie has said he is very comfortable working within his terms of reference.

Dame Angela Eagle: It is an understatement to observe that the ministerial code has been more honoured in the breach than in the observance during the last few years, and trust in our politics has suffered as a direct result. It has taken the Government two years to respond to the 23rd report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and they have failed to accept the most important recommendations in it, including increasing the power and transparency of the work of the independent adviser on Ministers' interests. Why?

Oliver Dowden: We have already reformed the role of the independent adviser. It is now the case that the independent adviser can initiate investigations with the presumption that the Prime Minister will approve them. That is the appropriate balance, but we have to respect that the Prime Minister must be the ultimate upholder of the ministerial code, because it is an important principle of our parliamentary democracy that the Prime Minister is able to appoint whomever he chooses to ministerial posts.

Veterans Services

5. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure that services provided by the Government meet the needs of veterans and their families. [906247]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): This Government are delivering on their commitments within the veterans' strategy action plan to support veterans and their families. Our plan, which is backed by an additional £33 million announced by the Chancellor in this year's Budget, contains commitments across Government, including support for health provision, housing and employment, the majority of which have been delivered or are on track.

Andrew Gwynne: That is great and we all support those measures, but he will also know that the independent review of the UK Government welfare services for veterans found that the current system is "overly complex" and suffers from

"a lack of cohesion, of strategic direction and single oversight".

It also found that veterans regularly receive "poor communication" from Government and were left "overwhelmed" by the system. Does the Minister accept responsibility for those failings and what is he doing to fix them?

Johnny Mercer: I initiated that review when I first came back into office under this Prime Minister. That review has now completed. It was due to report before Christmas, but I have pulled that forward and I want to see a response from Government to the review by the end of September or the beginning of October. The review highlights changes that have been overdue for some time and I look forward to having more to say to the hon. Gentleman on that matter when the response comes back.

Cyber-security

7. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure cyber-security across Government Departments. [906249]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): The Government's cyber-security strategy sets out our plans to strengthen the resilience of the Government's critical functions against cyber- attacks. A key milestone in our plan came earlier this year when I launched GovAssure. This is a new approach to cyber-resilience in which Departments review their cyber-security and take the necessary steps to meet the risks that we face.

Andrew Selous: These cyber-attacks, which are often totally devastating, have been increasing in both severity and frequency not only against Government Departments, but against many of our major businesses with potentially devastating consequences for livelihoods and jobs. What are we doing in Government to take the expertise that we have acquired within Government to protect Government Departments and to spread it across the economy to protect the private sector as well?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is totally correct that the external risk landscape is increasing all the time, not least because of the conflict in Russia and Ukraine, which has meant that the United Kingdom, after Ukraine and Russia, is the most cyber-attacked nation. We are taking a whole-of-Government approach, which is why we created the National Cyber Security Centre, working with GCHQ and the Cabinet Office to ensure that we have robust standards in Government and that we also work with businesses to improve their standards and, indeed, with private individuals.

Infected Blood Inquiry: Interim Recommendations

8. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to implement the interim recommendations of the infected blood inquiry. [906250]

11. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to implement the interim recommendations of the infected blood inquiry. [906255]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): It was a privilege to appear before the infected blood inquiry on 25 July. You, Madam Deputy Speaker, referred to birthdays earlier and I believe that that was the birthday of the right hon. Lady, but she shared it with us in the inquiry—she was there in person for the hearings. At the inquiry, I shared the work the Government are undertaking to consider the interim recommendations and I look forward to receiving the final report in the autumn.

Dame Diana Johnson: It was good to see the Paymaster General, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the House and the Chancellor at those reconvened hearings. Sir Brian

Langstaff made it very clear that his interim report on compensation was the last word that he was going to make on compensation. The Government have also accepted the moral case for compensation. What progress has now been made on Sir Brian's recommendation on extending the interim payments to those who were not included in the first tranche of interim payments last year?

Jeremy Quin: As the right hon. Lady knows, we are working through this. There is more work to be done. It is a mammoth undertaking, as she knows, and we are looking forward to the final report and putting our response into that context.

Jeff Smith: "Working through this" is not good enough. Several families in my constituency have lost partners or parents as a result of the infected blood scandal and they are frustrated by the delay and obfuscation. One of my constituents told me:

> "The lack of transparency is causing great stress and anxiety to those of us at the heart of this NHS treatment disaster who have already waited decades for our loss and suffering to be recognised."

One person is dying every four days. This is becoming urgent. Will the Government commit to a full compensation scheme as quickly as possible?

Jeremy Quin: We commit to responding as soon as we can to the final report. The hon. Gentleman is right that we have accepted the moral case for compensation. After the final report comes through, we will be bringing out our response as swiftly as we can.

Afghan Resettlement

9. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the progress made on moving Afghan people from hotels to settled accommodation. [906251]

20. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What recent discussions he has held with Cabinet colleagues on supporting Afghan people who have been resettled in the UK to access independent accommodation. [906266]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): Hotels are not and never were designed to be long-term accommodation for Afghans resettled in the UK. I am therefore pleased to say that, as of 1 September, in line with our promises, no legally resettled Afghans remain in bridging accommodation. As I told the House on 18 July, there is a small number for whom time-limited contingency accommodation will be provided, including where there is a need to bridge the short gap between the end of notice periods and settled accommodation being ready for them to move into, and in cases of medical need, where a family member requires continued attendance at a specific hospital.

Selaine Saxby: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the new Afghan families to North Devon and thank everyone locally who is working to ensure that their resettlement is as smooth as possible and to give them a true Devonian welcome?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and pay tribute to all those working locally in her constituency to prepare to welcome Afghan families to the area. North Devon is steeped in military history. I am pleased to see her long-standing support for veterans extend to those who assisted the UK in Afghanistan as well.

Peter Grant: I record my admiration for, and thank, the many public and voluntary agencies and individuals in Fife for the dedication and compassion that they have shown to the Afghans they have hosted over the last two years. Sadly, those Afghans are becoming victims of the biggest mass eviction that Scotland has seen since the highland clearances. When we remember that those people are here because they risked their lives for us—they risked their lives in Afghanistan for democracy—why have the Government not even considered a Homes for Afghans scheme, similar to the Homes for Ukraine scheme that made such a difference to desperate Ukrainian refugees?

Johnny Mercer: Largely because these are two different cohorts. Ukrainians are looking to return to Ukraine in the future; the Afghan cohort are staying here and will be in this country for an indeterminate period. We are looking at all ways that we can continue to assist those who have come over from Afghanistan. I, too, pay tribute to all the Home Office liaison officers and all the staff in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and in the Ministry of Defence who have worked hard to get this over the line. I said that we would honour our commitments to the people of Afghanistan and we will continue to do so.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Minister will be acutely aware, as I am, that around 2,000 Afghans who are entitled to the Afghan relocations and assistance policy are stuck in hotels in Islamabad. I know that he has seen the letter that went to the Prime Minister, which I signed along with other colleagues. What is the plan to get those 2,000 ARAP-entitled Afghans into settled accommodation?

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Member knows that this has been a long-standing concern of mine, both before Government and in Government. My area of specific responsibility in terms of getting people here and into hotels and accommodation has been completed. That is a Home Office area, and I have not had discussions on it so far, but everybody is aware of our commitment to the people who served in Afghanistan, and the Government will follow through on their commitment to those people.

Nuclear Test Veterans: Recognition

12. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to (a) recognise the contribution of nuclear test veterans and (b) support the roll-out of the Nuclear Test Medal. [906256]

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): While Hollywood remembers the work of Oppenheimer, the Government are committed to recognising the contribution of veterans and civilian staff across the UK and the Commonwealth to Britain's nuclear test

programme. The Office for Veterans' Affairs is investing £450,000 in projects to commemorate and build further understanding of their experiences. I recently visited the Worcestershire Medal Service in Birmingham's jewellery quarter to see the first nuclear test medals start rolling off the production line.

Jack Lopresti: Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress of applications for the nuclear test medal, and whether the medals will be ready to be awarded by Remembrance Sunday?

Johnny Mercer: Of course. Last time we were here, I made a commitment that we would do everything possible to get these medals on chests by Remembrance Sunday. We are in line with that commitment. We will meet that commitment. This has been a 70-year project and campaign by these individuals. I totally respect that for some it is not fast enough, and for some it is not enough to be done. We are straining every sinew to bring recognition to this cohort and we will continue to do so. We will have those medals ready for Remembrance Sunday this year.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I am pleased to hear that continued commitment to ensuring that medals are with nuclear test veterans in time for Remembrance Sunday. Our nuclear test veterans served our country with pride and distinction, but given the uncertainty caused by the Government's previous comments that the medals would be awarded by late summer, and then that they would be ready in the autumn, can we have some clarity, and will the Minister tell the House what recent discussions he has had with nuclear test veterans and their representatives about a formal medal ceremony? Can he guarantee that nuclear test veterans will be awarded their medals in a manner befitting their brave service?

Johnny Mercer: The hon. Member will be aware that Remembrance Sunday is coming up, which is a timeline that campaigners wanted to meet. That gives us a narrow window to do the sort of ceremony that I would think befits these individuals. It is a balance between getting the medals on people's chests for Remembrance Sunday and at the same time ensuring that they are awarded in a manner that is in keeping with their service. That is simply the art of the possible and what can be done. I am proud of what the Government have done on nuclear test veterans. Her party, when it was in power, did not award nuclear test veterans; in fact, she signed early-day motions to campaign against nuclear weapons, so I will not take any lessons on this. I am proud of what we have done, and I look forward to seeing medals on chests for Remembrance Sunday.

Mental Health: Civil Servants

13. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): How many days of sick leave due to mental health were taken by civil servants in 2022. [906257]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): Civil service sickness absence data are published annually. The latest data indicate that an average of 2.3 working days were lost per staff year due to mental ill health for the year ending 31 March 2022.

Mr Hollobone: I understand that nearly three quarters of a million civil service working days were lost due to alleged stress and mental health reasons, and that that figure is 40% up on the year before. Of course those with genuine mental health needs need appropriate support but, given that many civil servants enjoy pay and pension packages way in excess of what many people can get in the private sector, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that only those with genuine mental health conditions are granted a leave of absence?

Jeremy Quin: I know my hon. Friend will be aware that there has been, in both the private and public sectors, a large spike in all sickness absence this year, because of course the comparative data were with the pandemic period. The good news for him is that the most recent figures from the Office for National Statistics show that sickness absence for all forms is lower in the most recent period in central Government Departments than it is in the private sector. We work with people who are unwell, using occupational health and employee assistance provision to ensure that they get the support that they need. We continue to wish to drive down the numbers of people who are off for ill health and to ensure that those who are unwell get the support that they require, but we work with them.

Border Target Operating Model: Food Prices

14. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the border target operating model on the price of (a) meat, (b) fresh produce and (c) other foodstuffs. [906258]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): In April, the Government published a draft British border target operating model and on 29 August we published our final border target operating model, confirming its introduction on 31 January next year. It outlines our new controls regime, using better technology and co-ordination to reduce friction and costs, and will provide a simpler, yet secure, experience for traders moving goods across the border.

Sarah Olney: Small businesses up and down the country have spent countless hours and millions of pounds preparing for these changes, only to find that the Government are delaying implementation for the fifth time. How does the Minister expect businesses to have any confidence in making long-term investment and supply chain decisions when this Government have such a long list of U-turns and policy blunders?

Alex Burghart: The hon. Lady is right that we have pushed the date back several times, first because of covid, secondly because of Ukraine and thirdly to ease the pressure of the cost of living crisis. We are now working in line with business readiness, having had regular engagement with people across the sector. We have now set out, as she will have seen from the statement I made to this House in writing on 4 September and the written document published on 29 August, that we have a final time schedule.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Office for National Statistics has found that more than 50% of people are paying more for their food shop. What is the Government's plan to bring down inflation quickly to ensure that people can feed their families?

Alex Burghart: I was trying to glimpse the British border target operating model within that question. The Government have taken a range of measures in order to help bring down the cost of living for people, notably the very considerable help we have given people with the cost of fuel.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Minister.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; it is great to see you in the Chair so early in the day. Members will be aware that the Government attempted to sneak out in the summer that announcement about the utter chaos they have created over the border target operating model. I say to the Minister that inflation is of central relevance to this matter, because the cat is out of the bag. The Government's own document concedes that these measures, when introduced, will have an impact on inflation and will make the cost of food even higher. Can the Minister set out what assessment has been made of the wasted money and the cost to taxpayers and businesses as a result of the Government's chaos on this issue?

Alex Burghart: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his spot and I look forward to debating with him on this and other issues. I do not quite accept his categorisation of us as sneaking out a document by publishing it and sharing it widely on social media. As I explained to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), we have delayed implementation in response to the challenges the country has faced. We are now ready to move forward with a brand-new border target operating model, which has the support of businesses, of vets and of those dealing with sanitary and phytosanitary checks. It will be a very good thing for the country and will help us to secure our borders in new ways.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Well, that was announced when the House was not sitting, and to describe something that the Government concede will increase prices as a "good thing" is quite extraordinary and shows how out of touch they are.

Let me turn to another area of the Government's incompetence. The January 2024 deadline for the rules-of-origin provisions is now rapidly approaching. Unless this matter is dealt with, it will devastate our car industry. It should have been anticipated by the Government. Can the Minister tell us when an agreement for an extension to that deadline can be secured, and what contingency plans are in place if the Government fail to do that?

Alex Burghart: On the right hon. Gentleman's first point, the document was published when it was ready; it was not hastily snuck out during recess. On his point about readiness for the trade window in the car industry, that matter is being taken seriously by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, who I am sure will be ready to say something shortly.

Public Services: Industrial Action

15. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to maintain public services during industrial action. [906259]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): Cabinet Office Ministers have, through Cobra, been assisting Departments in their responses to industrial action. When there is a spate of industrial action across the public sector, which causes huge disruption to our constituents, it is particularly important that we act together, and the Cabinet Office assists Departments in their planning.

Mr Mohindra: Like many of my constituents, I commute to London daily via rail and have had to deal with another summer of disruption caused by ASLEF and the RMT, while students are applying for jobs with unconfirmed grades from unmarked exam papers and junior doctors continue to strike. What is the Minister's Department doing to end the strikes and get those people back to work so that we can continue to clear the backlogs and reduce the inflation that they claim to be striking against?

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend is right: it is outrageous that his constituents can have their lives totally upended by strikes and by militant unions. We will, of course, respect the right to strike, but we have a duty to protect the lives and livelihoods of the British people. That is what our minimum service levels legislation aims to do. It is a pity that the Labour party will not support it.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The Labour party governs in Wales and the Tories are in charge here in England, while Scotland is the only place in the UK to avoid any strikes in our NHS. That is because Scotland has had and will continue to have the fairest and best pay deals in the UK thanks to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Health Minister recently offered to mediate in the fresh talks between the UK Government and junior doctors. Has the Minister considered that approach given the incompetence of his colleagues?

Jeremy Quin: We will take absolutely no lessons from the SNP on how to govern countries—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman looks at the news about what is going on in Scotland or hears about it when he visits his constituency. We have in this country a Government of whom we can be proud. I am not certain that that is the view of the Scottish people.

Public Procurement: Value for Money

16. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help ensure value for money in public procurement. [906260]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The UK Government already award contracts on the basis of most economically advantageous tender. Furthermore, we are currently taking the Procurement Bill through Parliament, which is an opportunity to streamline procurement processes and ensure that value for money remains central to the UK's procurement regime.

Ruth Cadbury: It is important that taxpayers get value for money when public services are outsourced. Over recent years, the Home Office has given vast sums of taxpayers' money to Clearsprings Ready Homes, yet the accommodation that it has contracted out for housing asylum seekers has been unfit for human habitation, partly because so much taxpayers' money is being skimmed off by unaccountable intermediaries before it reaches the hotels or food providers. What is the Cabinet Office doing to stop that sort of thing happening in outsourced services?

Alex Burghart: I am unable to comment on the specifics of that case, but on the broader point, the Procurement Bill covers a range of issues, including how we can improve quality within our supply chains. Perhaps the hon. Lady will join us for ping-pong next week.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): I welcome the recent announcement that a growing number of small and medium-sized enterprises have secured Government contracts, but businesses with a social purpose and female-owned businesses are still under-represented in public procurement opportunities. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss what can be done to remedy that?

Alex Burghart: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend about this and other issues. She will know that the Procurement Bill means we are now looking at the most advantageous tender, which means that value for money remains central but that those seeking to strike up procurement can also look for other factors when deciding which contract to sign. We are very much on the same page.

National Resilience

17. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What progress his Department has made on strengthening national resilience. [906261]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Strengthening our national resilience is a key priority for me and for the whole Government. Last month, we updated the national risk register. This is the most transparent approach ever taken by any Government, designed to help the whole of society make the most resilient plans possible. We have also published guidance clarifying lead Government Department responsibilities for risk assessment, preparedness, response and recovery.

David Duguid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. Can he tell the House what discussions he has had with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on ensuring that we have strong security of energy supply as we progress through the energy transition?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that security of energy supply is critical to our national resilience, and we have made significant progress on this. We are moving from often imported fossil fuels to clean home-grown energy sources, and I look forward to working with the new Energy Secretary on this very important issue.

Environmentally Sustainable Transport

18. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he is taking steps to encourage Departments to use environmentally sustainable transport. [906264]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The greening Government commitments prescribe all Departments to address the matter of environmentally sustainable transport management by reducing and refining their need to travel through hybrid working and the current location strategy. Departmental locations, where possible, are all within 10 minutes' walk of a major public transport hub.

Mr Sheerman: Will this team wake up? They have huge potential in the Cabinet Office to influence every Department of State. From my perspective, as a passionate supporter of sustainable transport and particularly the revolution that is coming in hydrogen power, I see an inert Department not pushing other Departments to do better. Could they wake up and do something about this?

Alex Burghart: I can think of nothing nicer than being woken up by the hon. Gentleman. I can reassure him that we do encourage our colleagues in other Departments to go further on this. We have a range of carbon offsetting programmes in place and, as I say, our location strategy means that we try to locate people near public transport hubs. This is the very essence of a green transport strategy.[1]

Public Sector Fraud

19. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent public sector fraud. [906265]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I am delighted that, in its first year of operation, the Public Sector Fraud Authority is expected to surpass its initial targets, as part of the overall £3 billion recovery of fraud over the last two years referred to by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. More widely, the Government have invested £1 billion in fraud and error reduction since 2022, and we continue to be recognised as a world leader in combating public sector fraud.

Mary Robinson: We know that whistleblowers are responsible for uncovering almost half of all fraud—fraud that costs the public sector an estimated £40 billion a year—yet our laws to protect and support them are not working. If we want to tackle public sector fraud, we need to encourage more people to come forward. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to discuss how we can better support whistleblowers and tackle this vast expense to the public purse?

Jeremy Quin: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, or one of my ministerial colleagues will. I can reassure her that we do wish to support whistleblowers. It is important that they are supported in doing what they do. We certainly respect and are grateful for information shared by whistleblowers. It is just part of the system,

1. *[Official Report, 7 November 2023, Vol. 740, c. 3MC.]*

though, and it is important that we continue to use AI to ensure that we can track down fraud across the public sector.

Topical Questions

T1. [906268] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): Tomorrow marks the first anniversary of the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, and it is of course right that as a country we honour Her late Majesty's legacy. As a first step towards that, the Government, jointly with the royal household, have established a new Queen Elizabeth Memorial Committee. That committee will develop proposals for a permanent memorial to the late Queen and a broader legacy programme that will enable everyone in the nation to commemorate her life of service to us.

The Cabinet Office plays a critical role in strengthening our national resilience, and over the summer we published the most comprehensive edition of the national risk register to date. That important piece of work will help the Government and the whole country prepare for the challenges we face.

Ruth Cadbury: The Cabinet Office is currently carrying out a review into Homes England, and my concern is about the Help to Buy scheme, which helps people to get on to the housing ladder. The Government outsourced that service to Lenvi earlier this year, and since then my constituents have faced huge delays in getting their applications processed. Is the Minister proud of creating a Help to Buy scheme that is doing the exact opposite of what it says on the tin?

Oliver Dowden: Of course, it is incumbent on Ministers to drive efficiencies in arm's length bodies such as Homes England. I am very happy to pick that up with my relevant ministerial colleagues.

T2. [906270] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend tell us anything more about the Government's plans for the late Queen Elizabeth II's memorialisation?

Oliver Dowden: I have already met with Lord Janvrin, who will be leading the committee. He of course has two decades of experience in service to the royal household, including as private secretary to Her late Majesty. The aim we are working towards is that the committee will report by 2026, which would have been Her late Majesty's 100th birthday.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I begin by associating myself with the Secretary of State's comments on marking the anniversary of the death of the late Queen.

The responsibilities of the Cabinet Office include the National Security Council and co-ordinating the Government's response to crises. Last night, we learned of a major breach of security with the escape from Wandsworth prison of Daniel Abed Khalife, a terror suspect who was accused of gathering information that could be useful to a hostile state. Can the Secretary of State update the House on the search for Mr Khalife, and whether—in the light of his Department's responsibilities for national security and resilience—he has asked why such a terror suspect was being held at a lower security category prison such as Wandsworth in the first place?

Oliver Dowden: May I begin by welcoming the right hon. Gentleman to his new position? It is wonderful that the great tradition of gingers across the Dispatch Boxes continues—although, if he does not mind, one should perhaps describe him as a legacy ginger. He brings a wealth of experience to the role, and I look forward to our exchanges.

The right hon. Gentleman is of course right to raise this case. As he will know, the Lord Chancellor has asked for an urgent investigation, working with the Prison Service to find out the exact circumstances of what happened in respect of this escape. Clearly, the initial law enforcement response will be led by the Home Office, but I will be working with the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary and others to ensure that we rapidly apprehend this individual and learn the lessons of what led to this escape in the first place.

Mr McFadden: I thank the Secretary of State. I can only say to him that the hair may go but the skin remains the same, so in solidarity I wish him well in the current heat.

It is reported that Mr Khalife managed to escape by clinging to the underside of a food delivery van. This is obviously an extraordinary situation, given the strict procedures that are supposed to govern the entry and exit of vehicles on the prison estate, so can the Secretary of State outline how those procedures will now be reviewed; what other aspects of prison security will also be reviewed, and over what timescale; and when the public and Parliament will be informed of any changes made as a result of this very serious breach of security?

Oliver Dowden: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to raise all of these questions, and that is precisely what my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor is overseeing with an examination into that right now. If the individual escaped in those circumstances, that clearly should not have happened. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend takes it very seriously indeed, and will of course update the House on the outcome of the investigation. Of course, the Home Secretary will update the House, alongside the Lord Chancellor, on steps to apprehend the individual.

T4. [906272] **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): Over the summer I once again visited Rolls-Royce and met some of its brilliant apprentices, and last year, with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I was shadowing our Royal Navy. It is clear that some of the challenges on nuclear skills are mirrored in the military and the private sector. What is the Cabinet Office doing to bring together extra work and extra career paths, so that those who have nuclear skills can transition between the two?

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): I thank my hon. Friend for his very important question. Alongside a lot of the support mechanisms we have introduced—Operation Fortitude, Operation Courage, Operation Restore and Operation Nova—we have a

series of missions or sector initiatives for accelerating veterans who have come out of the military with specialist skills into a job and making sure those skills are not going to waste. Having a job remains the No. 1 factor in improving the life chances of veterans. Veteran employment is at 87%—it has never been higher—but there is more to do, and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend in the months ahead.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is clear from their actions that the Tories want to privatise our health service, selling data from England's NHS to a Trump-backed business, Palantir, under a £27 million data deal. This was done without a competitive tender. Not only that, but they also accepted a £5 million donation from a rich health tycoon this week. Does the Deputy Prime Minister not agree with me that the only way to guarantee protection and integrity for Scotland's NHS is to keep it out of Westminster Tory hands and keep it in the hands of the people of Scotland?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Alex Burghart): The hon. Lady will know, because she sat on the Procurement Bill Committee, that we have a new procurement regime coming in, but in the case she refers to it is my understanding that everything was above board and in line with due process.

T8. [906276] **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I join you in wishing my hon. Friend the Minister a happy birthday?

Given that the constitution is reserved to this UK Parliament, and given that there did not appear to be much in the way of anything new in the programme for government set out this week, does my hon. Friend agree that the First Minister of Scotland would do well to focus on the real issues that matter to the people and businesses of Scotland, rather than obsessing with breaking up the United Kingdom?

Alex Burghart: As ever, my hon. Friend has his finger on the pulse. I was lucky enough to be on a work trip to Edinburgh and Glasgow just before the summer break, and all the people I met there were interested in employment, skills, the state of the health service, and law and order. Not one person raised a second referendum with me, which is because it is not among people's priorities in Scotland. People's priorities are the same as those of the Westminster Government.

T3. [906271] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Ipsos recently published its annual poll on trust in politics, which revealed that only 12% of respondents actually believed what a politician was saying—the lowest level in 29 years. Will the Minister look again at my Elected Representatives (Codes of Conduct) Bill, which is aimed specifically at restoring trust and confidence in politics and politicians?

Alex Burghart: I am very happy to look again at the hon. Lady's work. Our general belief is that it is our actions in this place and outside it as elected representatives that will restore trust in politics rather than legislation, and that is a job for all of us.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): The cost to Government of ill health runs into hundreds of billions. The economic impact of obesity alone is estimated to be over £58 billion, accounting for the cost to the NHS and social care, lost productivity, workforce inactivity and welfare payments. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it is time for a taskforce to look holistically at health and societal challenges and to develop early intervention strategies on a multi-departmental basis?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight those challenges. The health service—I have seen this in my own constituency—is coming up with innovative models to look at wider public health, and to address exactly that issue. We want to get more people back into the workforce, and we need to deal with some of those long-term challenges.

T5. [906273] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): Although the police data leak in Northern Ireland was caused by human error, it raises wider concerns about cyber-security and data for our public service workers. I have been approached by constituents who work particularly within policing. They would like some reassurance that the Cabinet Office is working with forces across England and Wales to ensure that those types of data breaches do not happen again, and that the Cabinet Office will do more work on securing people's personal data, particularly when they are working in services such as the police force.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): The hon. Gentleman is right to say that this issue is local to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but he is also right—I fully acknowledge this—that there may be questions to learn across Government about how we make certain that people's data is secure. It is critical that individuals working and providing a service to the country know that their data is secure. I agree with him on that, and I have had discussions with officials about what we can to do ensure we can give that reassurance.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Cabinet Office convene an inter-ministerial committee —between the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and the Treasury—to consider what to do where we have built tens of thousands of houses but section 106 money has not been allocated for adequate health facilities? This is a problem across our country and on both sides of the House. I hope we will solve it for the future with what we are doing with the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill and the infrastructure levy, but there is a legacy problem that needs the attention of the Cabinet Office. Given its co-ordinating role in Government, that would be a very useful thing for the Department to do, and an extremely necessary one.

Oliver Dowden: That is an interesting proposal. If we are to get public consent for the number of houses we need to build, we must be able to reassure people that the infrastructure is in place. That is precisely what the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill seeks to do. I will look at my hon. Friend's proposal for an inter-ministerial group. I am always a little cautious about setting up

more inter-ministerial groups, unless I can be sure that they will actually deliver some further outcomes, but I take his proposal seriously.

T6. [906274] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Cleaning and security staff in three Whitehall Departments are now striking over a poverty pay offer by the outsourced contractor ISS. What are Ministers doing to help resolve that dispute with the Public and Commercial Services Union, and to end the race to the bottom for the pay and terms and conditions of vital workers due to outsourcing?

Jeremy Quin: I am sorry that strike action is ongoing. Ultimately, this is a matter between the employees and their employer.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Will the Minister for Veterans' Affairs update the House on the Northern Ireland legacy legislation?

Johnny Mercer: Yesterday the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill passed this House. Legacy is an incredibly difficult issue. Victims have been let down for many years. Veterans have been let down. This Government made a commitment that we would see through our promises to both those groups, and that is what we did yesterday. I am disappointed that the Opposition voted against it again, but politics is about choices, and I am proud of what this Government have delivered.

T7. [906275] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Further to the question on the infected blood inquiry from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), why will the Government not get on with extending the interim payments now, as they could do and as was recommended by Sir Brian Langstaff? It is absolutely shameful to delay that any longer, and there is no excuse.

Jeremy Quin: I have heard many times from the hon. Lady about this subject and about her constituents. She speaks about it passionately in this House and has done so for a number of years. I come back to my earlier answer: we paid interim compensation last year, as the House is aware, and the second interim report has come through. I am expecting the final report in the autumn, putting us in a place to respond as swiftly as possible once it is received.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Yesterday marked a year since the Prime Minister's predecessor took office, and as you may remember, Madam Deputy Speaker, a lettuce ended up outlasting her. Due to Tory economic mismanagement, that same lettuce would now cost around 20% more. The cost of food might not be an issue for the Prime Minister, who is the richest MP in the House of Commons, but it is a concern for my constituents. What discussions have Ministers had with Cabinet colleagues on tackling food insecurity?

Oliver Dowden: I know that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Chancellor of the Exchequer engage regularly with supermarkets, food providers and others to make sure that we continue to keep prices low. It is the case that since the Prime Minister came to office, we are now seeing inflation falling, and we have seen a record upward revision in growth numbers, which now show that we recovered faster from covid than any other European country, contrary to the repeated assertions of the parties on the Opposition Benches.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am going to have another go: why is it that the Minister has not been able even to implement recommendation 17 of the second interim report, which is to set up a bespoke psychological service for those infected and affected, when other nations of the United Kingdom have been able to do that? Why has England been left out? Why have the Government not been able to do that?

Jeremy Quin: That issue is being taken forward, as the right hon. Lady knows, by the Department of Health and Social Care. I know it has made substantial progress on exactly such a scheme, and I look forward to it making an announcement in due course.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The forthcoming by-election in Rutherglen and Hamilton West will be the first in Scotland under the new requirement for voter identification. We know that thousands of voters in England were disenfranchised at council elections because they did not have a passport or driving licence. What specific steps is the Cabinet Office taking to make sure that the voters of Rutherglen and Hamilton West, who want to turn out in their thousands to elect Katy Loudon as their MP, are not prevented from doing so because they are too poor to own a passport or driving licence?

Alex Burghart: I hope the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that people can only vote if they have a passport or driver's licence. If he does not know that that is untrue, he now does. We have had a widespread publicity campaign to ensure that people understand the identity requirements at elections. At the local elections, despite considerable scaremongering from Opposition parties, the disruption was minimal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes questions. I pause for a moment to allow the change of dramatis personae on the Front Bench—there is quite a lot of movement this morning.

Business of the House

10.32 am

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We come to business questions, and I welcome Lucy Powell to her new post as shadow Leader of the House.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 11 SEPTEMBER—General debate on Ukraine, followed by a motion relating to appointments to the Electoral Commission.

TUESDAY 12 SEPTEMBER—Tributes to the Clerk of the House, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Online Safety Bill, followed by a debate on a motion to approve the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2023.

WEDNESDAY 13 SEPTEMBER—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Procurement Bill [*Lords*], followed by consideration of a Lords message on the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, followed by a debate on a motion to approve the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2023.

THURSDAY 14 SEPTEMBER—Debate on a motion on football and dementia, followed by a debate on a motion on support for bereaved children. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 15 SEPTEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Leader of the House for that update. She has put this job on the world stage, and I look forward to working with her. May I also welcome my deputy, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), fresh from the Public Accounts Committee? I also welcome the new Members to their places, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather).

I am delighted to take up this important role, and I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who was a great shadow Leader of the House. I also thank some of her predecessors, too, for their advice. All of them said that this job is vital for upholding truth and democracy and for ensuring that the Government are held to account by His Majesty's loyal Opposition. I fear that this is now needed more than ever.

After 13 years of this Government, our politics has increasingly been dragged into disrepute by cronyism, scandals and, as I am afraid always happens with a Tory Government, sleaze. I am sorry to say that this House, our sacred seat of democracy, has become an afterthought to a press release, a place for Ministers to avoid at all costs if they can—disrespected and disregarded by disinterested Ministers.

In this place, where Ministers used to regard it as their duty to be candid, we have seen rule breaking, evasiveness and spin, despite Mr Speaker's valiant and often successful efforts to the contrary. Ministers do not seem to know what their power is for anymore, with

"a zombie Parliament where nothing meaningful has happened...the Government is adrift."

That is not my verdict, but that of the former Member for Mid Bedfordshire.

The writs were moved this week for two more by-elections. Adding to the slew of others, they speak volumes about this rotten Government. Today we hear that the people of Tamworth can finally get an MP they can be proud of.

Sometimes these sessions are an occasion for levity—let's be honest, there is plenty of material. Just this week, we had the Education Secretary's hot mic interviews. But quite frankly, it is just not funny anymore; it is tragic. It is tragic to see this country's reputation and potential trashed by a Tory Government that have lingered too long.

The debates and statements this week have brought no real answers about fixing crumbling schools after a decade of under-investment. Parliament and parents need answers, so can the Leader of the House provide them? Will she lay before Parliament the advice given to the Prime Minister before the spending reviews that cut funding to school rebuilding? Can she tell us exactly when the "new evidence" of the imminent danger was given to Ministers? Will she guarantee that the list of schools published yesterday is correct, and pledge that Ministers will come to Parliament to update it? Will she confirm that 19 of the schools affected had building projects cancelled in 2010? Will she lay before Parliament a full list of all public buildings affected by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete?

May I advise the Leader of the House not to repeat the nonsense we heard during Prime Minister's questions yesterday? Indeed, will she first correct the record of the Prime Minister's claims? The Leader of the Opposition has raised school building safety many times, including through Opposition day motions, which the Leader of the House voted against. Labour's programme, which was aimed at secondary schools, was the biggest capital investment in schools for a generation, and her Government scrapped it immediately on taking office. Before criticising it again today, she might want to be reminded of the fact that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has since said that scrapping it was his "biggest mistake".

Finally, we have had no mention of this week's anniversary, which Conservative Members might want to forget: it is one year since the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) became Prime Minister. In the interests of parliamentary accountability, it is an important event to debate, as her six-week tenure left a crippling legacy for mortgage holders, with millions now paying hundreds of pounds a month more, thanks to her reckless decisions, all of which the Leader of the House defended and supported. At the time, the Leader of the House said that the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk had a "bold economic plan". Will she now apologise for putting her in office and for the price the rest of us are paying for her kamikaze Budget? Will she bring forward legislation to stop the House being brought further into disrepute by the former Prime Minister's elevating her cronies to the House of Lords? We have had no contrition.

It is the Leader of the House's job to uphold the integrity of this place and its Members, including former Prime Ministers, in the eyes of the public. How will she ensure that Parliament can do this?

Penny Mordaunt: First, I add my voice to the many who have paid tribute to the Lionesses for their incredible achievements. We are all so proud of them, not just for the brilliant football they played, but for their conduct and the solidarity they have shown with the Spanish team.

I do wish to commemorate an important anniversary, but a different one from the one that the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) mentioned. Many right hon. and hon. Members will be thinking of Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on the anniversary of her death, which is this week, and I anticipate many tributes to her service, strength and devotion to duty in the coming days.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) for her service to this House. I very much enjoyed working with her. I welcome the hon. Member for Manchester Central and her team to this place. I hope I can say congratulations to her, but I understand if commiserations are in order. The clock has struck midnight and she has had to leave the glittering ball that is the culture, media and sport brief. Gone are the growling engines of Silverstone, the champagne flutes of the Royal Opera House and the peeled grapes of BBC hospitality. Ascot's horses have turned into House of Commons mice, and she is in the scullery with me for company. I thank her for the meeting we have already had. For my part, I will do my best to make sure that it is productive and enjoyable, and I look forward to working with her and her team.

I must reject the hon. Lady's characterisation of both this Parliament and this Government. In this Session, 34 Government Bills have achieved Royal Assent, amounting to 1,578 pages of legislation. We have been very busy indeed, and I thank all Members of this House for their attention to that. I also reject her characterisation of this Government. She focuses on correcting the record, and I take what she says seriously and genuinely. All credit to her, she admits when she has got things wrong. She admitted that she was wrong to support the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). *[Interruption.]* No.

I think the hon. Lady is wrong about the Prime Minister's comments, but I understand that she will not take my word for it, so I suggest she looks at *The Times*' analysis of yesterday's exchange, which backs the Prime Minister both on the building programme and that he did not cut the budget. I would be interested in how many times she raised RAAC as an issue in this House when she was shadow Education Secretary. Given her commitment to the facts, will she admit that Labour has got it wrong on the economy? Labour has been, wrongly, talking this nation down, but it has now been demonstrated that we have had the fastest recovery from the pandemic in the G7. That is vindication of the Prime Minister's furlough and bounce back loan schemes.

The hon. Lady understandably focuses on the situation of school infrastructure. I remind her that Labour's building schools programme excluded 80% of schools, and was poor value for money and highly ineffective. On a personal note, when I got my seat in 2010, my schools were so bad that a secondary school was shut because it was too dangerous to teach in and had Legionnaires' bacteria in it. It and another in my patch have now been rebuilt, and we have a new university technical college.

The hon. Lady criticises Secretaries of State for Education, but what they have delivered means that, across England, we have 10% more good or outstanding schools, nearly 30,000 additional teachers and the best literacy outcomes in the western world. The current Education Secretary put the safety of children first, in contrast to Labour in Wales, which has not acted so swiftly, despite similar warnings. The health and safety priorities of the Labour Government in Wales appear to be focused on people buying meal deals, as opposed to a lump of concrete falling on a child's head. That goes to show that Labour's priorities are wrong. In bankrupt Birmingham, politically correct street names trumped paying women a fair wage. Good stewardship of public funds was trumped by utter incompetence on an epic scale. As a leaked memo from Labour headquarters said:

> "Budget cuts and the size of the City are used as reasons to explain the situation however, this does not hold up under scrutiny".

Our Prime Minister recognises that for us to be worthy of public support, we must focus on the public's priorities: the safety and education of their kids; in particular, a strong, growing economy, lower debt and inflation; great, accessible healthcare; and border control. Where Labour is in power, and in its support of strikes and votes against our legislation, it shows that it cannot and will not deliver on those priorities of the British people.

I will close by giving the hon. Lady, on her first outing, some advice. From this Pompey supporter to that Man City supporter opposite: in politics, as in football, the blue team is always best.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): This House, as the Leader of the House is aware, takes a dim view of bullying—unless it is by me. She will be shocked to learn that Britain's worst water company has now resorted to thuggery and strong-arm tactics to silence parliamentarians and the press. I refer, of course, to the Pennon Group, which includes the nation's filthiest and leakiest supplier, South West Water. Its chairman, Gill Rider—who worked for the Cabinet Office and so is used to leaks, I suppose—has hired City lawyers to threaten the press and parliamentarians if we speak out against the company. She is running a mob that has convictions for polluting rivers, pays its top gun criminal bonuses and, despite the wettest July on record, still has a hosepipe ban. It is operating like a mafia. This is absolutely appalling. May we have an urgent debate in Government time on these ruddy water companies, who are blackmailing their customers and parliamentarians to stop the truth coming out?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend has raised issues related to that particular company many times in business questions, and the whole House can sense his frustration and anger with what is happening. I suggest that he may wish to raise the matter with the relevant Secretary of State on 19 October. He is an experienced parliamentarian and will know how he can achieve a debate.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I, too, welcome the shadow Leader of the House to her post and I pay real tribute to her predecessor.

It is a bit of a surprise to us all that the Leader of the House herself is still in post, hanging on against all the odds, especially given the way her Government are

unravelling day by catastrophic day. During summer recess we all saw her on her latest leadership tour in Scotland. Madam Deputy Speaker, she cannot stay away from the place. Two visits in one year—it must be a record for a Tory Minister! Speaking at a fringe event, she characterised Scotland as a "fierce and powerful nation" being held back by the "bile and hatred" of the SNP. In her reflections on her visit, the Leader of the House mounted a defence of the Union based on our "poems", "our rivalry", and our "blood and our brotherhood". Madam Deputy Speaker, we have no interest in being "fierce", whatever that means; we just want the power to govern ourselves like any modern democratic country and build a fairer, greener and more prosperous nation.

I think I know why the Leader of the House is so keen to head north of the border. It is because when she is there she sees a very different country. I could not put it better than the respected Oxford professor Danny Dorling, who said last month:

"Scotland is showing us the route to a fairer society and is helping to prevent Britain from becoming a failed state."

Professor Dorling added:

"Scotland already has a lower proportion of children living in poverty than the most affluent region of England, which is the south east. Further progress"—

on inequality—

"has been achieved through the Scottish Child Payment…raised to £25 a week".

And finally:

"Scotland shows us a better way forward."

In contrast, he has described the reaction of politicians in England to addressing inequality as being to promise

"only minor remedial actions with short-term impact".

The Leader of the House called me delusional when I pointed out to her previously Scotland's faster economic growth, our lower unemployment and our lower rates of child poverty than the rest of the UK, and when I told her that not a single day in the Scottish NHS has been lost to industrial dispute and that we have the best paid teachers in the UK. The next time she comes back from a day trip to Scotland, can we have a debate on what she has learned from us?

Penny Mordaunt: Well, I have genuinely missed these exchanges, where the hon. Lady blames everyone except the Scottish Government, who are one of the most powerful devolved Administrations in the world. She invites me to tell the House what I learned on my very pleasant trips to Scotland over the summer. I learned that Scotland has slower economic growth than England. I was shocked to learn that Victorian diseases, such as rickets, have returned to certain cities in Scotland, and that Glasgow's rat problem is now so bad it is precluding binmen accessing certain streets because it is too dangerous for them. I discovered that the bill to Scottish taxpayers for the smelting business debacle stands at £32 million. I discovered that £33 million, which was ringfenced for Scottish farmers, has gone AWOL. I also learned that the Scottish auditors have only been able to give a qualified sign-off to the SNP's accounts.

I toured other parts of the UK as well. In Manchester—this may interest the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell)—I discovered that Greater Manchester police had been forced to issue a crime reference number following a complaint about the SNP giving constituency seats in return for cash. I also learned that there is a £1 billion black hole in the Scottish programme for government, which was announced this week. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for inviting me to put that on the record.

The hon. Lady seeks to blame everyone else for this situation: me, the UK Government, and anyone else who is around except the Scottish Government. This summer, a former colleague of hers even tried to blame agents of a foreign power for infiltrating the SNP and making all these terrible decisions. The SNP is never short of a grievance, but it is now running out of excuses. I look forward to hearing next week what other excuses there may be. The execution of Mary Queen of Scots? The highland clearances? The hundred years war?

The grotesque chaos and appalling public services from which the hon. Lady's constituents and the rest of the Scottish people are suffering are entirely down to the SNP. They are now a sad, spent force, and are no longer the UK's separatist party: that dubious honour now goes to the Labour party in Wales.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): The Leader of the House may be aware of a tragedy that struck a chord of sadness and anger among my constituents, in the wider Black Country, nationally and, indeed, internationally.

The building known as the Crooked House pub was built in 1765. It was symbolic of the region's industrial heritage, and was home to tens of thousands of individual personal memories. Soon after its sale, the Crooked House was subject to an arson attack, followed by unlawful demolition, notwithstanding the local council's instruction that that should not be done. This is an ongoing trend across the country. May we please have a debate in Government time to see what this place can do to better protect such heritage pubs?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue, and I hope the approval for his question that I have just heard across both sides of the House was audible to others. I believe that this appalling incident is still subject to a police investigation, but it appears that roads leading to the pub were blocked to prevent emergency vehicles from reaching the fire. I hope I speak for all of us when I say that this is an appalling and disgraceful situation. I was encouraged by the statement from Andy Street that it would be dealt with, and that if it turned out that there had been foul play, people would be held to account. I am sure that if my hon. Friend applied for a debate it would be extremely well attended, and that he has the support of everyone in this place.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business. I note that she did not announce the business for Monday 18 and Tuesday 19 September, but I understand that the Government intend to award the Tuesday to the Backbench Business Committee. If that is the case, we would propose a pre-recess general debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment. The one that took place before the summer recess was very well subscribed and time limits were imposed, and I am sure that this would also be a popular debate.

[Ian Mearns]

I now need to declare an interest, in that I am the chair of the governors of a maintained primary school and a member of the board of trustees of an academy trust. One aspect of the Government's management of the crisis over reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in schools is, on the face of it, bizarre if not perverse and wasteful: namely the fact that moving furniture from an affected school to an empty building would apparently fall under revenue costs and would not be allowable under the Government's current proposals. If the school decided not to move furniture but to buy brand-new furniture for an empty building, that would be allowed to fall under capital costs.

That seems to me to be a very strange decision on the part of the Department for Education. Could the Leader of the House perhaps check to see whether that is indeed the case, and if it is, could she persuade the Department to change its mind about supporting revenue costs, given that that would be wasteful and unwise?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his always helpful adverts for forthcoming Backbench Business opportunities. He knows that I wish to give him as much notice as possible, and I will continue to do so when we have locked in the time.

I am all in favour of gumption being applied, and I will make sure the Secretary of State for Education, who is also in favour of gumption being applied, has heard what he has said today and makes sure all Members know the facts.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): We have manifesto commitments to ban the live export of animals for slaughter and to crack down on the illegal smuggling of dogs. The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill would have delivered those promises, but it was withdrawn. When will the Government produce new legislation to keep those important promises?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this important point. We have a great track record on improving animal welfare, and our animal welfare legislation is now world leading. We are still committed to those manifesto commitments, and my committee is busy looking at these issues. She will know that further business will be announced in the usual way, but she should be reassured.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Today is 270 days since Azerbaijan began its blockade of the Lachin corridor, causing huge hardship to the population of Nagorno-Karabakh, who are under siege without basic supplies and whose suffering is getting worse. Can we have an urgent statement from a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister to make sure the Government are using all the levers they have to press Azerbaijan to comply with international obligations and lift the blockade?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this matter. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions are not until 24 October, so I will write on her behalf to make sure that Ministers have heard her concerns.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I want to praise the Rush skatepark team and stars such as Edith Bowman, Tom Smith, Andy Burrows and Katy Pearson for organising an incredible fundraising event at the Sub Rooms on Friday night. Young people are, sadly, still devastated by the council's decision to close Rush skatepark a few years ago, but we are working to rebuild a brand-new, even better skatepark for them. I urge everyone in the district to support it. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look into how often sports such as skating, scooting and BMX get attention in this place and see whether she can find time for a debate on this life-changing set of sports and their popularity among young people?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for the work she is doing to ensure that these much-needed facilities can continue in her constituency. She is absolutely right, and I know that many Members of this House very much value sports clubs and societies, and particularly the sports she mentions. She will know that, if she were to apply for a debate, it would be well attended. We have had a number of debates on these issues quite recently.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Osteoporosis affects about 15% of the UK population, especially women. Early diagnosis is vital and could lead to many thousands of preventable deaths. The Royal Osteoporosis Society is based in Bath, and I am sure the Leader of the House and everybody here will join me in congratulating it on its excellent work. The Royal United Hospital in Bath has a specialist fracture clinic, but only half of NHS England trusts provide such clinics. Can we have a debate in the House on support for fracture liaison services and on people living with osteoporosis?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue and for the work going on in her constituency on this important matter. The next questions to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will be on 17 October, and I will therefore draw to his attention the good best practice in her constituency. Osteoporosis and brittle bones are a key cause of fractures. If we could reduce pressure on the NHS by making sure we alleviate those conditions, that would be good too.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Residents across Keighley and our wider area are getting fed up with fireworks constantly being let off throughout the night and well into the early hours of the morning. That is not limited to bonfire night; it is happening throughout the year. Many are part of celebratory events, particularly weddings, and are let off by families who have no consideration for their neighbours, which is having an impact on young people, pets and hard-working people who just want to get a decent night's sleep so that they can get up in the morning. May we have a debate in Government time on better enforcement, holding West Yorkshire police to account, and tougher licensing provisions on the sale of fireworks? We could also look at restricting the use of fireworks to public events only.

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being the first person to raise this issue. I anticipate he will be the first of several, as this is a common theme at this time of the year. He has raised his concerns with regard to his constituents and I shall make sure the relevant Secretary of State has heard those by writing

on his behalf today. I suggest that the Backbench Business Committee might be the best place to secure a debate. Having been in this job for a year, I know that such a debate is likely to be well supported and well attended.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Leader of the House aware that Guy's and St Thomas's hospitals, where many of us have benefited from treatment, are among the very few of our hospitals at the top of the world rankings? Why do so few of our constituents live near a world-class hospital? What has gone wrong in the past 13 years with our health service, where we have so few of the world's leading hospitals?

Penny Mordaunt: We have many fabulous hospitals. When I came into this House in 2010, my local hospital was the worst in the country for MRSA and clostridium difficile infections, but it is now a fantastic hospital. Health outcomes have improved there, despite all the stresses of the pandemic, and we have a new accident and emergency department being built, which will open next year. That is the story of many places around the UK. We should be celebrating and talking up the fantastic hospitals in this country, just as we should be talking up our strong economy and all the opportunities we have here since we left the European Union. I hope that one day the Labour party will do that.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The record 1,455 police officers in Bedfordshire achieved under the leadership of Chief Constable Trevor Rodenhurst and the police and crime commissioner Festus Akinbusoye are very welcome. However, we face a serious problem with shoplifting, with a low proportion of police turning out when shops notify them and an even lower number of convictions. I have some shops locally where store managers are telling the shoplifters to take what they can so long as they do not hurt the staff. This is simply unacceptable in a cost of living crisis, when poorer people and all of us have to end up paying more. May we have a debate in which we can raise these issues and make clear to the Home Office this House's views on shoplifting and the action that the police need to take?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point, and he is absolutely right in what he says. Small shops are lifelines for communities; it is a sorry state of affairs if they are not able to thrive and are disincentivised from continuing their business. He will know that, leaving aside fraud and computer crime, we have halved crime since 2010, on roughly the same—slightly more—resource. That is a tremendous record, but there is more to be done, with a particular focus on antisocial behaviour and these kinds of crimes. He will know that the Home Office recently said that every crime of this nature needs to be followed up and investigated. I will make sure that the Home Office has heard what my hon. Friend has said. I think such issues will be the focus of many colleagues in the coming weeks.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I have written to petrol providers in Barnsley asking them to lower prices, because they are regularly 3p a litre higher, if not more, than in neighbouring areas in Yorkshire. Indeed, this week it is cheaper to get petrol in central London than in Barnsley. I simply do not believe that motorists in Barnsley should be paying a petrol premium, so will the Government make a statement on what they are doing to tackle local and regional price disparity?

Penny Mordaunt: That is a very important issue which will affect many households in the hon. Lady's constituency, as well as businesses. She will know that the Government have acted and are setting up what Fair Fuel UK has called a PumpWatch scheme. The Competition and Markets Authority is now establishing a number of measures to ensure that there is fair pricing at the pump and that competition is improved. She will know that the Government have done other things to help her constituents and to lower the cost of fuel. In the same time that Labour put up fuel duty by 46%, we have lowered it by 7.5%.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): On the eve of the rugby world cup, will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Aramis Rugby, a North Devon-based manufacturing company, on providing all the scrum machines used in this year's tournament? Following the success of the Lionesses and with England hosting next year's women's rugby world cup, can we have a debate in Government time on the links between hosting sports events and participation in sports?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that and giving us the opportunity again to celebrate the successes of women in sport, as well as the fantastic news of our hosting the next women's rugby world cup. That is wonderful news and we have a great record of hosting such events. Since 2012, we have hosted over 130 sporting events, which is a great record to be proud of. I will make sure that her enthusiasm has been heard by the relevant Minister.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Leader of the House will be alarmed to learn that the police have confirmed that last year there were 15 attacks on war memorials in Northern Ireland—atrocious, despicable attacks, where poppies were ripped off, plaques removed and there was criminal damage. Last year there were five arrests for those terrible events and some of those cases are ongoing. Does the Leader of the House think it would be appropriate to have a debate on this issue, or is there a better way of raising awareness so that the public can express their concern and outrage at those attacks?

Penny Mordaunt: I am extremely sorry to hear that. I know that for many local communities who tend those memorials that will be a hugely upsetting thing to have happened. It is incredibly important that those memorials are protected. If the hon. Gentleman were to apply for a debate, I think it would be extremely well attended. I will make sure that the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and for Defence have heard his concerns.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Last weekend, I was thrilled to attend Southend City Jam, an international festival of street art. It is the largest in Europe and displayed 240 artists from around the world, including Brian Lewis, known as JEKS, from North Carolina, who is in the Public Gallery, along with his girlfriend, Melissa. Given the festival brought in over 200,000

[Anna Firth]

visitors to the new city of Southend, can we have a debate on the role of street art as part of our rich cultural heritage?

Penny Mordaunt: It sounds like an absolutely wonderful event. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing it, as well as our visitors, to the House's attention. She will know that almost £5 million in Arts Council England funding has been awarded to 162 organisations involved in street art or graffiti art, which is an important part of our culture. She may also wish to give the subject another airing at the next Culture, Media and Sport questions, the date of which is to be confirmed.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Section 71 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 requires that by April 2023 the Government lay before Parliament a report on spiking. That deadline has long passed and the Government are now facing threats of legal action for failing to meet their statutory duty. The longer the Government dither and delay, the more vulnerable people are put at risk. Can the Leader of the House confirm the precise date that she expects the report to be laid before Parliament?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point. I will make sure that the Home Secretary has heard her concerns and contacts her office with an update. The next questions to the Home Office will be on 18 September.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Many of my constituents have contacted me to express concern about the delay in passing regulations on the use of electronic collars. Electronic collars work by delivering an electronic pulse to suppress unwanted behaviour, which can be painful and frightening and even decrease the animal's ability to learn, so I was pleased that in April the Government announced a very welcome ban on their use. However, no date has been set for the final stages of legislation. More than 90% of the population are in favour of implementing a ban as soon as possible on this cruel practice. Does my right hon. Friend agree, and can she confirm a timetable for bringing forward this important piece of legislation?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is right that we are committed to this matter. We are not intending to ban things such as perimeter fencing, which protect animals, but shock collars cause unnecessary suffering. I will make sure that the Secretary of State has heard her keenness for an update. She will know that the next Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions are not until 19 October, so I will write to the Department today on her behalf.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell)—my good friend and Greater Manchester neighbour—on her appointment to her new position as shadow Leader of the House. I know that she will do an excellent job. I also wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on being appointed her deputy.

As Britain and India negotiate a trade agreement, it is important that benefits of such a deal are shared across the regions and nations. Despite a large community of people of Indian heritage and many Indian businesses in the north of England, and the fact that Manchester airport, a stone's throw from my constituency, is the third busiest airport in the UK, there are no direct flights between Manchester and India. Will the Leader of the House therefore grant a debate in Government time on connectivity from Manchester airport to international destinations and the potential benefit that that would bring to the north-west and, indeed, to the rest of the country for trade, culture, family ties and our educational institutions?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and, as a former trade policy Minister, I can tell him that one of the benefits of more regular economic dialogue with our partner nations is to address precisely those things. In fact, part of my visits to various countries around the world, including the United States, was about securing extra flight routes into his local area. It is tremendously important, not least because we want to attract investment and businesses to those areas. He will know that we will not be having live discussions about trade deals, but I know that such accessibility will be very much part of the discussions and script from which our Ministers will be working.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): Car insurance firms often increase premiums after a crash even if the accident is caused entirely by the negligence of another driver. For one of my constituents, Ageas increased her premium by 40% after filing a no-fault claim, despite the fact that the car was parked legally and my constituent was not even in the vehicle when the crash happened. This is because, statistically, those who file any claim are deemed by the insurance companies more likely to make a future claim. That assumption completely ignores individual circumstances and is extremely unfair to those who make no-fault claims. Can we have a debate in Government time on this system and on what steps can be taken to prevent insurance companies from making these unfair assumptions and fleecing our constituents, particularly at a difficult time regarding the cost of living?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising what he has identified as a very important issue. He is an experienced parliamentarian and will know how to apply for debates. I am sure that if he did apply for one, it would be extremely well attended. In raising this matter today, he has given insurance companies the opportunity to respond to this concern. If there are any public affairs officers from the major insurance firms listening to this debate, I would encourage them to take to social media this afternoon to clarify their policies on this area. I am sure that we would all applaud them if they stepped up and gave their policyholders an excellent service.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The covid pandemic affected all of us, but the most devastatingly affected were the families who lost loved ones, and they are still being affected. Next Wednesday I will launch my new film, "The Unequal Pandemic", which focuses on three families' experience. It reveals that, instead of being the great leveller that the Government

said that it would be, the pandemic exposed deep structural inequalities, affecting who and where was most impacted. I would love to see the Speaker of the House and all Members at the launch, but will the Leader of the House allow for a debate specifically on what we can do to ensure that the inequalities that affected the experience of the pandemic are addressed adequately?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this matter and advertising this event. She is absolutely right, particularly as the covid inquiry looks at these matters, that the experiences and concerns of those who lost loved ones should be at the forefront. It was a terribly traumatic few years for everyone, with the isolation and the additional pressures that people faced. To lose, in some cases, multiple family members during such a time is incredibly hard to metabolise and bear. She will know how to apply for a debate, but if she sends the details to my office I shall look at ways I can support this.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): My constituents generally support reaching net zero, but not when we put in front of them the estimated increase in costs to their family to pay for it, not least the additional costs of green tariffs on energy bills, moving away from gas boilers, banning new petrol cars, and so on. The transition to net zero is estimated to cost around £1 trillion and will invariably be borne by hard-working families who can least afford it. Having debated the Energy Bill this week, would now be an opportune time to consider holding a debate on the estimated costs of net zero and how it will affect ordinary families in this country?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point. I have great sympathy with what he outlines. I would not just say, "What is the fair and right thing to do?" If we want to be successful in making this transition, and helping other countries to do so, we can do that only with technology, solutions and innovation that people will love and want to adopt, and that will make their bills cheaper and their lives easier. That is the only way we will be successful in meeting our environmental ambitions. I encourage him to apply for a debate, and to focus on not just the costs, but the value of innovation and how we can encourage British businesses to be at the forefront of it, and take their ideas and sell them to the world.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): This Sunday is World Suicide Prevention Day, and so many organisations and groups will be working hard to highlight the need for all of us to work towards preventing suicides—groups such as If U Care Share in the north-east, which will be running its "Inside Out" campaign, as well as national charities. I hope that Members from across the House will help to spread the message that it is good to talk, to reduce suicides. As we await the publication of the national suicide prevention strategy—imminently, I believe—can we have a debate in Government time on the strategy and how we can prevent suicide?

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of everyone here I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important awareness moment and giving us all the opportunity in this place to thank the many local groups that will be dealing not only with this issue specifically, but with improving mental health and wellbeing and mental resilience in our communities. I will certainly make sure that the Secretary of State hears that there is a keenness to have a debate on the strategy when it is produced, and the hon. Lady will know the actions she can take to secure one.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): With her legendary attention to detail, no doubt the Leader of the House has seen this morning's report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies—an authoritative report showing that so deep now are the class and regional differences in our society that social mobility has been reversed by more than 50 years. Can we have a debate in Government time so that we can address the issue, particularly for poorer families in the north of England whose children find it difficult to share in the success that this society allegedly promises them?

Penny Mordaunt: Historically the UK has had slower social mobility over many decades; that is improving, but there is more that needs to be done in this area. That will only be helped by people being able to get into work and make progress through work. That is why I supported our reforms on universal credit and why I think we should be celebrating getting 4 million people into work, there being 1 million fewer workless households, and 1 million of that 4 million being disabled people who would not have had the dignity of a pay packet had we not brought in those reforms. Focusing on opportunities for young people, we should celebrate our emphasis on alternative routes other than pure, traditional university degrees: apprenticeships and ensuring that young people are in education, employment and training.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It has been a very stressful week for parents worried about their children returning to schools and whether they are safe. Now I understand that the list produced by the Department is inaccurate and that some schools have been told that they should close yet they are not on the list. I remember the confusion, chaos and further distress that was also caused when the Building Schools for the Future list went out. This affects all our constituents, so it is not a party issue. It would be helpful if the Leader of the House ensured that the information the Department for Education sends to all our constituents is clear on what is happening with the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete issue across the country.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. If we want to reduce the stress levels that people are undergoing, we must ensure that information is timely and accurate. I know that that is what the Secretary of State for Education is looking to achieve. I will raise this with the Department and ensure that the list, if there are errors on it, is dealt with. I will also ask for a point of contact for Members, if they have not already been issued one. In situations such as this, it is important to be able to get hold of someone to confirm whether something is accurate, or when local issues crop up that need to be resolved quickly. I shall certainly recommend that the Secretary of State does that. I know that she wants to ensure that Members have answers to questions they want to raise and that her Department is delivering a good service to this House.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): On Wednesday 6 September the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am a member, published its report into local authority-administered covid support schemes in England. It found

[Sarah Olney]

that, of an estimated £1.1 billion of fraud so far, less than 2% has been recovered. While schools, local councils, hospitals and prisons are crumbling due to a lack of funding, does the Leader of the House agree that this Government failure urgently needs to be addressed, and will she commit to providing Government time to discuss it?

Penny Mordaunt: It is incredibly important that we learn the lessons from the pandemic and the Government are very keen to do that. What I would say to such criticism is that all fraud is bad and we want to ensure that it is eliminated and money is recovered, but at the time the Government were right to act swiftly to ensure we were able to keep households and businesses going. The fact that we have now been able to show that our economy has recovered the swiftest out of comparable nations has demonstrated that that approach was right, whether through the furlough scheme, the bounce back loans or the other support that was provided to businesses. Where we can recover funds we will and we must; it is appalling that organisations, particularly bogus businesses, committed fraud at that particular moment of national crisis and need, and we should throw the book at those people.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I also welcome my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) and for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) to their new Front-Bench roles. The shadow Leader of the House alluded to the fact that this time last year, the Leader of the House backed her "hope candidate" and said:

> "Who can lead? Who can build that team and deliver for our country? Who does have that bold economic plan that our nation needs?... I've seen enough to know…the person I'm going to put my faith in".

Of course, that person was not the current Prime Minister but the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss). Can we have a debate in Government time on the achievements of her "hope candidate"?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman tempts me. I will give him some achievements of the right hon. Member to whom he refers—I hope that he has given her notice of his question, but I suspect that he has not, because I am sure that she would have been here to tell him herself. I think that we ought to recognise that she delivered a lot for this country, including some of the first from-scratch trade deals. She served in many Departments, including the Treasury. I would be very happy to have a cup of tea with him and talk about the things that she did in the service of this country.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My constituents who work in the Defence Equipment and Support depot in Beith will engage in strike action on Monday over the unequal application of bonus payments, which has created a two-tier workforce. Strike action is unprecedented in DE&S, which currently supplies important equipment to Ukraine. I have raised this matter with the Secretary of State for Defence. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her support for those workers, and will she urge management at the depot to provide parity and fairness for their workforce?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important point and for highlighting the impact that such action may have. Our commitment to Ukraine and the other partners we work with is unwavering. It is obviously critical that we have a good supply chain to ensure that they are able to continue their heroic efforts. I do not know the details of the dispute. She says that she has already raised it—quite rightly—with the Secretary of State for Defence, but if she thinks that there is anything else I can do to assist her in resolving the situation, my door is always open.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): In 1958, 65 years ago, thalidomide was first marketed in the UK. It was withdrawn three years later in 1961. One hundred thousand babies were affected worldwide; 90% were miscarried or stillborn. Sadly, of the 10,000 victims who survived to birth, fewer than 3,000 are alive today, and about 400 of them are in the UK. Can we have a debate on why it took this House until 1972, 11 years after the withdrawal of the dangerous drug thalidomide, to hold a debate on that issue and get compensation for the victims? I am sure that this House would want to ensure that mistakes made over dangerous pharmaceuticals are never repeated.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman has placed on record those historical events and the fact that, through this House, compensation was after many years quite rightly paid to those individuals. He will know that there are currently live inquiries, not least—I look at the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) on the Labour Back Bench—on the infected blood scandal, which has taken at least three decades to get an inquiry and to be resolved. I am very proud that this Government set up that inquiry under a former Prime Minister, and to have been the Minister who kickstarted and established, with Sir Robert Francis, the compensation study. I recently gave evidence to the inquiry; the hon. Gentleman might like to read it to reassure himself of the commitment of this Government, and of the whole House—I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North for her diligent campaigning on the issue—to protecting patients where things go wrong. We want to do right by them.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): That is a great segue into my question. The Leader of the House appeared before the reconvened infected blood inquiry in July, along with the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Paymaster General, so she knows very well the views of Sir Brian Langstaff, the chair of the inquiry, and the feelings of those infected and affected. Could she give an undertaking to this House that, as soon as the final report is published by Sir Brian, there will be an oral statement on the Floor of the House and the Government will come forward with an action plan to implement all the recommendations in the interim report, which they have had since April this year, so that finally people can receive the compensation they have been long due?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising this, and I will certainly make sure that the Minister for the Cabinet Office has heard her request. I would think it very unusual for such a huge piece of work that is of such great interest to so many in this House not to be accompanied by a statement on the matter.

Even if we include those who have been affected, as well as infected, it is a comparably small number of people, but we often forget that what happened to these individuals could happen to all of us. It was not risky behaviour or something they were doing; they simply were accessing healthcare, or they were the partners of someone who had accessed healthcare, been infected and did not know they were infected, and people have been impacted in many other ways. This affects all of us—it affects everyone in this country—and that is why it is particularly important.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to see the Leader of the House back in her place. As Members will know, each week I bring a focus upon persecution across the world, and this week we focus upon Pakistan because of what is happening. On Monday past, an Ahmadi mosque in Karachi was destroyed. In August, eight Christian churches in the Punjab were burned in just one day. In July, two Hindu temples and a shrine were destroyed in Karachi over a weekend. Pakistan is experiencing a surge of violence towards religious minorities, fuelled by a rise in blasphemy allegations. Will the Leader of the House join me in requesting a statement on those cases and recommend ways in which the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office can increase monitoring at this time?

Penny Mordaunt: On behalf of the whole House, I thank the hon. Gentleman for again using business questions to shine a spotlight on the issues of persecution and intolerance of freedom of religion and belief around the world. I thank him for shining a spotlight on what is going on in Pakistan. He will know that, historically, in terms of finance and people on the ground, our strongest bilateral mission from the FCDO is with Pakistan, and we will have great influence there. I shall certainly make sure that the Foreign Secretary has heard what he has said and ask him to follow up with the hon. Gentleman's office.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Could I please raise the issue of the high street chain Wilko? It strikes me that the current outcome, which includes the loss of half the stores and all the jobs for a paltry sum, 13 million quid, is suboptimal when we consider the fact that the chain turned over more than £1 billion last year, and there are businesses across the UK, including one in Berkshire, that would have been happy to bid more than £100 million for the whole business and all the jobs. I accept that this is a commercial consideration, but could the Leader of the House please represent my concerns with the Department for Business and Trade? We should be prioritising jobs over creditors.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very sad situation, which I know will be of concern to many individuals. It is obviously a commercial decision, but this is a very worrying time for employees; the swiftness of the timeframe is also worrying. On behalf of my hon. Friend, I will write to not only the Department for Business and Trade but the Department for Work and Pensions, which in similar circumstances has also provided support to the workforce. I will ask both Departments to contact my hon. Friend's office, and I thank him on behalf of many Members of this House for raising this matter, as it will affect a number of parts of the country.

HMPPS Update

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before we come to the statement, I remind the House that the individual in question has been charged with criminal offences, and that the House's sub judice resolution applies to those charges. Members should therefore take care to avoid referring to the details of those charges or saying anything that assumes the guilt or innocence of the individual concerned.

11.36 am

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. With your permission, I would like to make a statement on the escape from HMP Wandsworth yesterday morning, Wednesday 6 September, of a prisoner by the name of Daniel Abed Khalife.

Daniel Khalife was remanded in custody at HMP Wandsworth on 28 January this year, having been charged with offences alleged to have taken place in 2021 while he was serving in the armed forces. As you have already indicated, Madam Deputy Speaker, the House will understand that, while a live criminal investigation is in progress, there are limits on what I can properly say. Daniel Khalife will be caught in due course and will face a trial. Nothing should be said in this House or elsewhere that might prejudice those proceedings, so let me assist the House with what I can say.

At approximately 7.30 am yesterday, a vehicle that had made a delivery to the prison's kitchen left HMP Wandsworth. Shortly afterwards, local contingency plans for an unaccounted prisoner were activated and, in line with standard procedure, the police were informed. The prison was put into a state of lockdown while staff attempted to determine Daniel Khalife's whereabouts. The vehicle was stopped and searched by police after the alert was raised. Strapping was found underneath the vehicle, which appeared to indicate that Daniel Khalife may have held on to the underside of it in order to escape. The search is under way. His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service is giving every assistance to the Metropolitan police's operation to recapture Daniel Khalife and return him to custody. As has been made clear by the Metropolitan police, there is no reason to believe he poses a threat to the wider public.

Yesterday, when I was first briefed on this grave security breach, I spoke to the governor of HMP Wandsworth and senior HMPPS leaders to establish what was known about the escape and seek assurances about the immediate measures being taken to ensure the security of the prison. I made clear then, and I reiterate now, that no stone must be left unturned in getting to the bottom of what happened. Who was on duty that morning, and in what roles, ranging from the kitchen to the prison gate? What protocols were in place, and were they followed? Secondly, I have ordered an investigation into the categorisation decision by HMPPS: were all relevant matters taken into consideration in determining where in the custodial estate Daniel Khalife should be held? In both cases, I have asked for the preliminary findings to be with me by the end of this week. An assessment will then be made of what can properly be put into the public domain. I have also decided that there will need to be an additional independent investigation into this incident, which will take place in due course.

[Alex Chalk]

I now turn to the wider prisoner cohort held by HMPPS. In the light of these events, I have ordered two urgent reviews: first, into the placement and categorisation of everyone held in HMP Wandsworth and, secondly, into the location of all those in the custodial estate charged with terrorism offences.

Let me turn now to the issue of prison security. As the House will no doubt be aware, escapes from prison are extremely rare and the numbers have declined substantially in the last 10 to 15 years. This has been due in considerable part to sustained investment in improved physical and intelligence security. That includes investment of £100 million in the period since 2019 on measures, such as enhanced gate security with X-ray body scanners, which has driven up the finds of drugs, weapons and other contraband, including tools that could be used to aid an escape from prison. HMPPS has also enhanced intelligence and anti-corruption operations in prisons, working more closely than ever with partners, including the intelligence agencies. This has involved productive initiatives, such as setting up the joint counter-terrorism prisons and probation hub.

Daniel Khalife will be found, and he will be made to face justice. I commend this statement to the House.

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

11.40 am

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I thank the Justice Secretary for advance sight of his statement, and I reiterate our support for the police and all those who are involved in the search to recapture Daniel Khalife. I very much hope that that search will be brought to a swift and successful conclusion so that the rest of the legal process may take place.

This is an extremely serious matter, and it has highlighted catastrophic and multiple failures in respect of not just this case, but our wider criminal justice system. It simply beggars belief that a man being held on suspected terror charges was able to escape prison by clinging to the bottom of a food delivery van. The simplest question for the Justice Secretary today is: how on earth was that allowed to happen? How is such an escape even possible? Nothing that he has said to the House so far gets us remotely close to a full answer to that central question.

I know the Justice Secretary will say when he responds to me that it is early days, that he has ordered the relevant investigations and that they must have some time to conclude. But with respect, it gives me no confidence that the Justice Secretary has today arrived with a list of basic questions that, frankly, he should already know some of the answers to and be able to share with the House. I note with complete agreement both what he said and your direction, Madam Deputy Speaker, that nothing must be said either in the Chamber or anywhere else that may prejudice any future trial or indeed the live operation that is currently under way, but the circumstances and the facts of the escape itself are a separate matter that is of legitimate and urgent concern to this House and to the wider public. That is separate from the nature of any and all charges that will form the basis of future trials or other investigations. The Justice Secretary really does need to give much fuller answers to the House, rather than a list of his own questions.

On the circumstances of the escape itself, can the Justice Secretary at least tell the House when he responds how many staff were on duty at Wandsworth prison yesterday? Is he confident and can he tell us that all the relevant searches were done and, where there are failures, the number of protocols that he is concerned may have been breached? Will his investigations assess the quality of the training and the experience of prison staff at HMP Wandsworth, and will he be bringing in any additional expertise to assist with those matters while he is getting on top of the facts himself?

In respect of the categorisation of this particular prisoner, why was a suspected terror offender held at a category B jail while on remand, despite many other suspected and indeed convicted terrorists being held in the high security estate? Why was Daniel Khalife moved from Belmarsh to Wandsworth? Can the Justice Secretary at least tell us whether a risk assessment was undertaken before any such move took place? That is at least a yes or a no answer. Can he tell us how many similar suspects are in category B or indeed in HMP Wandsworth, and what is the timescale for such an assessment?

In relation to the two urgent reviews, may I say to the Justice Secretary that, with respect, it should be a relatively short exercise to get across the detail of the total number of the current prison population at Wandsworth? The fact that he has not come to the House with even that small amount of detail is unacceptable.

On the location of all those charged with terror offences, will the Secretary of State tell us the total number of individuals who are considered to be in that category as of today, across the whole prison estate? When will that urgent review of those numbers—I hope he can share the total number—take place? I accept that he cannot share any details, but does he know the number of individuals who might be of concern and may need to be moved to a different location, given yesterday's events?

I note that the Secretary of State has ordered a fuller investigation, but can he say anything about the terms of reference for such an investigation? What timescale does he envisage for that longer, fuller investigation? On the matter of independence, can he provide some reassurance that he will ensure that it will not be a case of him, and others who are ultimately responsible for this failure, marking their own homework? What consideration has he given to the independence and identity of who might be carrying out that investigation for him?

The developments of the past 24 hours have shown us yet another example of the Conservative mismanagement that has meant they are unable to run vast swathes of the public realm, whether that is schools, threatening our children's education and learning, or now with a terror suspect on the loose. Ultimately, one of the main functions of a Government is to keep their citizens safe, and on the Secretary of State's watch, courts are in crisis, probation is in crisis, the Crown Prosecution Service is in crisis, and prisons are in crisis. When will he get a grip?

Alex Chalk: I begin by welcoming the hon. Lady to her place, and I will try to address the points she raises. I was pleased to hear her remarks about not wanting to

prejudice a future trial, because we must keep in mind that escape is a criminal offence. She asks whether there will be inquiries into the staff on duty and the quality of training. Absolutely; that is precisely what I have asked to take place. She asks whether additional expertise is in place. Yes, that is already in place in Wandsworth at the moment, assisting with the investigation. As I indicated in my opening remarks, I want to know who was on duty in the kitchens and at the gate, what protocol was in place, and whether it was applied. If it was not applied, why not? Those are all questions I have asked, and she can be assured that they will be answered.

On timing, I have already indicated that I want to have the preliminary answers on my desk by the end of this week. I will then be able to make a decision, considering all relevant information, about what can be put into the public domain. However, we have to proceed carefully and on the basis of evidence. I say that because the hon. Lady raised a question that was factually incorrect. She asked why Daniel Khalife was "moved from Belmarsh", but he was never in Belmarsh. With respect, it is important that we do not proceed on the basis of misinformation, and I hope I make that point clear. I absolutely understand the proper public interest and points that are being raised. That is fine, but if the hon. Lady needs to ask me any questions about matters of detail, she has my number and she can call.

On who is held on the category B estate, that is exactly what I have asked of the inquiry that has been set up. I mean no discourtesy, but I think the hon. Lady may have misunderstood what I was suggesting by means of an inquiry. This is not an inquiry into the number of prisoners in Wandsworth, which is a matter of public record; this is about whether the right people are in Wandsworth, and whether those Wandsworth prisoners should be there or elsewhere. That is what needs to be answered.

On the independence of the investigation, of course that is right, and that is precisely why I have ordered it. In summary, this is a grave incident—the hon. Lady is right about that, and plenty of the points she raises are perfectly legitimate and we will get answers as quickly as possible. But we need to proceed on the basis of evidence, coolly and calmly, so that when Daniel Khalife is caught, as he will be, he will be brought to justice and justice will be done.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, for his courtesy in giving me notice of it, and for the characteristic thoroughness and care with which he has approached this matter. He is clearly going into the detail in a careful and measured fashion, which is the right approach. I also congratulate the shadow Secretary of State and welcome her to her post.

First, the Secretary of State has accepted the need for an independent element, and the Justice Committee has more than once referred to the need to avoid the Prison Service marking its own homework. Will he bear in mind in that regard the work that has already been done by His Majesty's chief inspectors of prison and probation in relation to Wandsworth and other prisons? They have real expertise, and I hope he will avail himself of it.

Secondly, in relation to his wider inquiry into the prison situation, when on the face of it there has been a significant improvement in gate security, the failure of gate security on this occasion is all the more alarming. It is a matter of record that there is an issue with staffing at Wandsworth and with retaining experienced staff across the Prison Service. We have a large number of comparatively inexperienced staff. Evidence submitted to the Justice Committee's inquiry on the prison workforce demonstrates concern over levels of training in some establishments. Will the Secretary of State make sure that those points are fully taken on board as part of a serious review of prison workforce on the back of this?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to these matters. As I have indicated, the inquiry must take its course and the issue of staffing will no doubt be considered. Necessarily, we cannot go into a huge amount of detail, but what I can say is that in all prisons staff take on different roles. On the specific issue of staffing at the security end of the prison, the positions were staffed and the security posts were occupied. The question is whether protocols were applied, and indeed whether people did what was expected of them under those protocols. We need to get to the bottom of that urgently.

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

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. My party hopes Khalife will soon return to custody. Leaving aside the extraordinary manner of the details of the escape, some more immediate questions arise. Mr Khalife may have been believed to pose a low risk to members of the public, but he was clearly thought to present a considerable risk to his service colleagues and to national security. As such, it will strike people as extraordinary that he was being held under category B conditions, rather than category A, pending any trial.

What is more extraordinary is that prison inspectors reported concerns in January last year about the measures in place at Wandsworth to prevent escapes, after finding what they believed to be potential shortcomings in physical aspects of security locally on site. It was also alarming to hear the former head of security at Wandsworth, Ian Acheson, on the radio this morning saying that, on any given day, some 30% to 40% of frontline staff are unavailable for duty at the prison.

The Prison Officers Association has highlighted that some £900 million has been stripped out of prison budgets in England and Wales since 2010, which will leave more prisons than just Wandsworth overcrowded and under-resourced. The Prison Officers Association's national chair has called this morning for an urgent review of how prisons across England and Wales are run. I appreciate that the Secretary of State has announced two separate strands of inquiry from the Dispatch Box, which I am sure will be welcomed, but will he expand the scope of his questioning to allow for that inquiry into how the Prison Service across England and Wales is run, in the light of the concerns that have been expressed?

Alex Chalk: May I deal with the hon. Gentleman's second point first? Prison officers do an extremely important job, and I will of course listen carefully to

[Alex Chalk]

what the Prison Officers Association has to say about this matter. I have already had a meeting—albeit predating this incident, as he might expect—and that productive and constructive relationship will continue.

Let me deal with the hon. Gentleman's point about categorisation, because I am instinctively sympathetic to his point about why this prisoner was in the category B estate. That is precisely what I want to have some information about, but we have to proceed with caution. Although we are not going to look at the details of the specific offences, section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000 is an either-way offence. There are other offences that are either-way. It is not the case, and never has been since the Terrorism Act was created 23 years ago, that everyone charged with a section 58 offence would be in the cat A estate. Were that to happen, it would turn the whole system of categorisation on its head. It is an offence I have prosecuted many times in the past. We need to ensure that we are looking at the detail of what he was charged with and the specific risk or otherwise that he may have presented.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): I echo the comments of the Chair of the Justice Committee about the tone and thoroughness of the Lord Chancellor's statement, and particularly his commitment to leaving no stone unturned. However, the presence of strapping on the underside of the vehicle would seem to indicate that some planning was involved. As well as the Lord Chancellor's questions about protocols and staffing arrangements, is there any implication that the prisoner may have had some assistance with the escape?

Alex Chalk: I hope that my hon. Friend will not take it as a discourtesy when I say that nothing has occurred to him about lines of inquiry that has not occurred to me, my ministerial colleagues and members of HMPPS. All lines of inquiry are being considered, including all those that I am sure are occurring to hon. Members.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): People in Tooting are alarmed that someone could escape from what is supposed to be an extremely secure prison. A few months ago, I raised the issue of low staffing levels with the Justice Secretary because I had concerns after speaking to Battersea and Wandsworth trades union council. My parliamentary question revealed that, shockingly, only seven prison officers turned up for a night shift last December to cover 1,500 inmates. That is unworkable and unsafe. Staff are having to do double shifts, with officers facing violence and abuse and struggling with their mental health. That makes staff retention impossible. In those circumstances, mistakes will happen.

Will the Secretary of State list the meetings that he has held with the prison leadership since I raised the alarm many months ago? Will he also tell us the average number of staff per shift at Wandsworth prison and the number of staff forced to take "payment plus" overtime shifts?

Sadly, this escape is not the only significant challenge that the prison has faced recently. In November, it was without water for six days. Prisoners could not wash and had to rely on bottled water. There is an endemic problem throughout our public services owing to 13 years of Tory mismanagement. School buildings are crumbling, our prisons are overstretched and falling apart and our NHS is under-resourced. When will the Government get a grip and sort it out?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Lady began by expressing concern on behalf of her constituents. She was right to raise that. I invite her and her constituents to consider the remarks of the Metropolitan police that the prisoner is believed to be a low risk to the community. It is important to stress that in the House.

It is an overriding and overwhelming priority for me to increase staff numbers, and I am pleased that they are increasing. Of course, I want them to go up further, but it is positive to note that, since 30 June, there has been an increase of more than 700 full-time equivalent band 3 to band 5 staff—wing officers up to custody managers.[1] I accept that we have further to go. However, it is also encouraging that the resignation rate is coming down. I do not suggest for a second that the work is completed—it is not, and it is perfectly fair for the hon. Lady to raise those points—but we are moving in the right direction.

On the third point, the preliminary indications, subject to the investigations that I have ordered, are that the security posts were manned in Wandsworth at the time of the incident. We now need to know, given that they were manned, what went wrong.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): I welcome the assurances that the Secretary of State has given about the investigations that will now follow. Can he update the House on what steps the Government are taking to increase security across the prison estate as part of the Department's £4 billion investment in increasing the number of prison places?

Alex Chalk: It is worth stepping back and reflecting for a moment on the fact that the programme of infrastructure investment in prisons is second in Government only to HS2. A huge amount of investment is going into our prisons and I have seen what that can do. I have been to HMP Five Wells and HMP Fosse Way. Millsike is under construction. Those are modern, safe, secure, decent and rehabilitative prisons. On my hon. Friend's specific point about security, as part of the overall scheme, we have put £100 million into enhanced gate security and X-ray scanners that can check for illegally concealed contraband. That is driving up seizures and driving down violence in prisons. Of course there is more to do, but that investment is yielding significant results.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wonder whether the Secretary of State was surprised that Daniel Khalife was allowed to work in the kitchens, a role that I understand is for trusted inmates?

Alex Chalk: That is precisely a question that has occurred to me and that I want answered, by the end of the week I would hope and expect, but certainly in very short order.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): This escape is incredibly serious and leaves many questions unanswered. It was reported by the Metropolitan police on social media yesterday that the escaped prisoner has links to

1. *[Official Report, 11 September 2023, Vol. 737, c. 6MC.]*

Kingston. My constituents and those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), naturally, will be very concerned. I appreciate that the Secretary of State will be limited in what he can say about the operation to apprehend the prisoner, but I would be grateful for any statement he can make to provide reassurance to my constituents and residents across south-west London.

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising those points on behalf of her constituents. We all have a duty, which she will uphold as well as anyone else, to ensure that people are not alarmed. I draw her attention and that of her constituents to the Metropolitan police's remarks that the man should not be approached, but that he is considered to be low risk, and not a larger risk to the wider public.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I remind the Justice Secretary that this is a very serious incident. Any prison escape is serious, but we should put it in perspective. I remember when he was very young, and before I was shadow prisons and policing Minister, back in 1966, the notorious spy and traitor George Blake escaped from Wormwood Scrubs, in a startling and disgraceful lapse in security. He lived to his mid-90s and finished his days in Moscow.

In the present circumstances there should be a thorough inquiry, but all of us interested in the justice system know that prison overcrowding is a serious problem. The excellent men and women who work in our prisons are under tremendous stress. This is a serious incident. I hope the guy gets captured quickly and faces real justice, but can we please do something about the prison estate and the good people who man it?

Alex Chalk: I agree with all the hon. Gentleman's remarks. Every prisons Minister and Secretary of State, whether Labour or Conservative, will say that prison officers do a wonderful job, and it is a hidden service. I believe that to my bootstraps, which is why I met the Unlocked Graduates in Leeds to thank them personally for what they do, and why we hosted a reception recently at No. 10. It is an incredibly important job that is beyond most of the people in this room, if I dare be so bold. It requires huge judgment, courage, integrity and decency. I pay tribute to them all.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Along with other residents in south-west London, my constituents are concerned about this incident. I welcome the actions of the police, and I am sure the man will be swiftly detained. I visited Wandsworth Prison in June, and as I arrived, six members of staff were being taken to A&E because they had just been assaulted. The prison officers' union has been raising staff shortages and inadequate training with me and others for a long time. I welcome the Secretary of State's inquiries.

I welcome the fact that the points where the person absconded were staffed. However, I hope the Secretary of State will still look into the staffing shortages in Wandsworth and the inadequate training, which has been raised by prison officers, who I agree do a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances in Wandsworth, a very overcrowded prison.

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Lady for raising those points. She is right about staffing; we need to drive it up. As I indicated, we have done things that make a meaningful difference—I was down at HMP Isis speaking to a band 3 officer about precisely that—such as rolling out body-worn video across the estate. That is an incredibly important tool to dial down potentially volatile situations and, if they are not dialled down, to capture the evidence to ensure that justice is done. That is making an enormous difference to bringing down violence. It is also having an impact on recruitment and retention—the resignation rate is going down, and the numbers we are recruiting are going up. The point that she makes in principle is fair, but equally, in that spirit of fairness, it is important to note that there are some very positive trends that we will build on and develop further.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Lord Chancellor for his statement and his update to the House this morning. He may well have seen the media speculation that Khalife was missing for around an hour before prison staff noticed. Is that correct? If it is, what reassurances can he give that procedures will be tightened up, not just in this particular prison but across the estate?

Alex Chalk: That is one of the very issues that is being looked into urgently.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his response, which we all welcome. It is obvious that he takes this issue very seriously. I understand the tremendous pressure our Prison Service is under. However, can he confirm that the decision to hold this man in a low-security prison, after previous escapes from another prison, is not to do with space or pressure, but rather based an assessment that has turned out to be severely flawed? A review of the procedure used is needed urgently. May I also ask the Minister if the findings of the inquiry that will take place can be shared with other Administrations, for instance the Northern Ireland Assembly and the policing and justice Minister?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman asks a really probing question and makes an important point, if I may say so. The decision about where he was held was based on an assessment of the circumstances relating to that individual and the alleged offending, not about whether there was space in the category A estate. There was space to put him there, if that had been the right assessment. What we have to get to the bottom of is this: was that exercise properly conducted? That is one of the reviews. To his second point, about whether the findings can be shared, my strong instinct would be that whatever can be shared, should be, so that across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland any learning can be absorbed as broadly as possible.

Prevent: Independent Review

12.6 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Suella Braverman): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the Prevent programme.

The terrorist threat to the UK is unrelenting and evolving, and, as I noted earlier this year in announcing our refresh of Contest, it is rising. To combat that, the tools to counter terrorism must evolve. Contest, our counter-terrorism strategy, has four pillars: prevent, pursue, protect and prepare. Prevent aims to stop people becoming involved in terrorism by tackling radicalising ideologies at their root. It is an early intervention programme that relies on frontline public services across society, including healthcare, education, local authorities, the police and civil society.

I am delivering wide-ranging reforms, following the reappraisal of its effectiveness by the independent reviewer of Prevent, Sir William Shawcross. Prevent needs to better understand the threats we face and the ideology underpinning them. Ideology is the lens through which terrorists see the world. Our agencies work closely with leading experts, practitioners and former extremists. They all say that ideology is pivotal.

Terrorism is fundamentally an attack on our ideas and freedoms, so we must attack the threat at its source and disrupt those who seed and spread extremist ideology. Non-violent extremism can certainly lead to violence, but it is a problem even where it does not. It undermines our values and divides communities by diluting our sense of shared belonging. That is why I have been so disturbed by the sorts of incidents we have seen recently in Batley, Wakefield and elsewhere. We do not have blasphemy laws in Great Britain and we must never succumb to their de facto imposition by a mob. Individuals under the Prevent duty must challenge those who enable "permissive environments" for radicalisation, where grievances, identity politics and disinformation are used to whip up fear and division.

Six months on from the publication of the independent review of Prevent, I am pleased to report significant progress to the House. We are on track to deliver our commitment to implement each of the independent review's recommendations in full. So far, working closely with the Minister for Security, we have completed 10 out of 34 recommendations, and 68 out of the 120 tasks. I expect to have implemented at least 29 of the 34 recommendations a year after the review's publication, and the rest shortly thereafter.

Today I am publishing the first major revision of the Prevent duty guidance since its introduction in 2015. Subject to the approval of Parliament, it will come into force on 31 December this year. The guidance is the key text underpinning the way in which Prevent is delivered by the range of partners most central to its success. The changes reflect the spirit and the detail of Sir William's recommendations.

I accepted the review's recommendation for thresholds to be reset to ensure proportionality across all extremist ideologies. RICU, the Research, Information and Communications Unit, which provides analytical and analysis products on behalf of the Home Office, was identified by Sir William as a concern. In the past, it has failed to draw clear distinctions between mainstream Conservative commentary and the extreme right. People such as my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) and Douglas Murray express mainstream, insightful and perfectly decent political views. People may disagree with them, but in no way are they extremists, and Prevent must not risk any perception of disparaging them as such again. From now on, all RICU products which report on extremist trends, and in future themes, will clearly state the purpose of such reporting and be proportionate.

Our new Prevent duty training, available on gov.uk, will highlight the importance of ideology and enhance understanding of the drivers of Islamist and extreme right-wing terrorism. We will pilot and roll out new face-to-face training alongside the new guidance so that organisations across the sector have the appropriate skills to spot genuine radicalisation. A new security threat check will ensure that strategic decision making related to Prevent is informed by the current threat landscape and local threats, and that activity is directed accordingly.

The review recommended great care over terminology. The term "susceptibility to radicalisation" should be used where appropriate, and the word "vulnerability" only where necessary. Many people who embrace extremism are affected by a range of complicating factors in their lives, but there is almost always an element of personal decision making in the choices they make. They must not be absolved of responsibility when they choose this path.

I have strengthened the operational delivery of Prevent by switching to a regional delivery model that provides support for all local authorities in England and Wales. The 20 areas in England and Wales with the highest risk ratings will receive multi-year funding. I have also provided Home Office Prevent expertise to Scotland. It is vital that Prevent does nothing actively to undermine its mission, for instance by supporting groups that work against the freedom and values that we stand for. Due diligence checks on partners delivering Prevent in local communities have been strengthened following input from the Commission for Countering Extremism and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Prevent, and public authorities such as the police, should not fund or work with those who legitimise extremism, such as CAGE or MEND—Muslim Engagement and Development. That is completely at odds with Prevent objectives. Extremist and anti-Prevent groups have waged mendacious and malicious campaigns to try to discredit Prevent as anti-Muslim to undermine its work. Through the work of a new specialist unit, we are now working to rapidly rebut and counter inaccurate information about Prevent when it appears.

The independent review found that Prevent had not taken antisemitism seriously enough, so specialist intervention providers have now been recruited to better address the prevalence of antisemitism in those referred to Prevent. They will work directly with those susceptible to radicalisation to deconstruct their extremist mindset and tackle it head-on. This approach is complemented by new research allowing Prevent to explain the pernicious and often subtle indicators of antisemitism.

Like any public service, Prevent needs independent oversight, and I expect the new standards and compliance unit to be operational and publicised online early in 2024.

It will process complaints from both the public and practitioners, and will take instruction from Ministers to conduct investigations and publish findings. The unit will be delivered by the Commission for Countering Extremism, and will be answerable to Ministers on the Prevent oversight board, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Security Minister.

Extremists of whatever disposition, be they neo-Nazis or Islamists, must know that in our fight against them, we will never be hampered by doubt or cowed by fear. Ensuring that Prevent is fit for purpose is critical to delivering that message, and to winning that fight. I commend this statement to the House.

12.15 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. I join the Government in paying tribute to the work of our security services, our counter-terrorism police, the myriad different agencies—local communities, councils and education bodies—that work on the Prevent programme, and all those who work so hard to keep us safe.

Extremists try to divide us and to undermine our democratic values and our respect for one another. Extremist ideologies are a stain on our society: they feed on fear and vulnerabilities to promote hatred and violence. We have seen appalling terror attacks, from the attack on children in Manchester and the attack in Fishmongers' Hall to the attacks on our own Jo Cox and David Amess. A strong and determined response to extremism and terror threats and threats to our national security, wherever they come from, is immensely important to our safety.

The Contest strategy rightly includes "prevent", "pursue", "prepare" and "protect", and it was right for the Home Secretary to update the House on the approach to extremism and to the Prevent programme. However, on a day when there are grave unanswered questions about how a terror suspect could possibly have escaped from prison, before trial, hidden on the bottom of a food van, I am astonished that she said nothing about Prevent and prisons. We have unanswered questions about how on earth the escape could have happened, and also about staffing levels. There have been repeated warnings of 30% staff absences and shifts not being covered. Those staffing issues are a matter for Prevent as well. The independent review highlighted an issue about which countless other reports have warned: the lack of sufficient action on deradicalisation and Prevent in our prisons. Prisoners are actually leaving prison more radicalised than they were when they went in. Referring to extremism-related training for staff, Sir William said:

"it became clear during the review that this training was frequently cancelled due to staff and resource shortages…I was further told that there have been delays to staff beginning Prevent training and to extremist prisoners beginning rehabilitative programmes. These delays are attributed to staffing and resourcing issues".

The Government have been warned repeatedly about this, and I am concerned about the complete lack of reference to it in the Home Secretary's statement. Will she please tell us what action is being taken, and also what action is being taken for those due to be released from prison—those who are due to be deliberately released, that is, as opposed to those who escape? Contest has warned that

"four of the nine declared terrorist attacks since 2018 were perpetrated by serving or recently released prisoners."

The joint inspectorate warned just a few months ago that there were not enough senior officials in place to oversee the 120 prisoners with terror-related convictions who are due to be released by next March. What deradicalisation and Prevent work have those 120 prisoners undergone in prison, and what provisions are in place in the community to ensure that there is no risk to the public? We cannot afford any suggestion of failure by the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to take national security treats in prison seriously.

Today's report from the borders inspectorate is highly critical of Border Force's failures on insider threats, saying that organisational structures for addressing

"insider threat were found to be confused, with complex inter-relationships and unclear lines of accountability".

What action is the Home Secretary taking to deal with insider threats?

There is also no mention of any action on online radicalisation or the use of artificial intelligence. Online radicalisation was raised by the independent review, and we know that generative AI raises further challenges and questions. We have identified potentially serious legal loopholes in our ability to take action against those who choose to use generative AI to try to radicalise people. What action is being taken on that? We have asked the Home Secretary about this before. Will she agree to Labour's proposal to tighten the law?

The majority of the extremist threats our security agencies deal with are Islamist extremism, followed by far-right extremism. Other warped ideologies have also driven violent threats, but the main focus must continue to be on Islamist extremist threats. I welcome the emphasis on antisemitism, but the agencies, the police and the Prevent programme need to follow the threats of violence and hateful extremism wherever the evidence goes, rather than having to follow any political hierarchies that have been set.

Neil Basu, the former counter-terror chief, has said that we also need to make sure there is earlier intervention and prevention. He said:

"If we set the bar for Prevent so high that it can deal only with those who are already radicalised, we will have more terrorists, not fewer."

Finally, what action is being taken in response to the former countering extremism commissioner's report on hateful extremism, published some years ago? Are the Government ever going to respond to that or update the countering extremism strategy, which is now eight years out of date? We need that action. Prevent is not a whole countering extremism strategy. We need broader action if we are to keep our democratic values safe.

Suella Braverman: I thank the right hon. Lady for her response. She raised several points to which I will respond.

First, I pay tribute to all the professionals and experts in our agencies who work day and night to keep the British people safe from the evolving, changing and, indeed, increasing risk we carry when it comes to terrorism. They work in many ways of which we will not be aware, but they make huge sacrifices. I am very proud of the progress that they and this Government have made in recent years. That includes the opening of a new counter-terrorism operations centre that is now up and running

[Suella Braverman]

and delivering state-of-the-art counter-terrorism work between all the agencies—be they the police or others—working in one place in a co-ordinated and streamlined way. I was pleased to visit CTOC recently. Our Contest strategy was relaunched earlier this year and, since 2018, 39 attacks have been disrupted by the brave men and women working in law enforcement and other agencies. That huge amount of work is going incredibly well.

Of course, the threat remains substantial, which means an attack is likely. There is no room for complacency on this issue, which is why I am wholly committed to focusing on the effective delivery of Sir William Shawcross's recommendations. That is why I have come to update the House today.

The right hon. Lady mentioned prisons and, of course, William Shawcross referred to the threat of terrorism, extremism and radicalisation within the prison estate. In fact, recommendation 27 makes it clear that better and more training is required for prison officers, which is why I am very pleased that there has been significant progress on the roll-out of the new terrorism risks behaviour profile. This new prison-based product is led by the Ministry of Justice, building on the recommendations made by Jonathan Hall and reiterated and built on by Sir William. That roll-out will be completed by the end of the year. The value of this new tool is that prison officers will be better trained. They will have more skills and more tools at their disposal to better identify terrorism and the risk that it poses within the prison estate. That is a direct response to recommendations and concerns that have been raised.

I refer the right hon. Lady to the previous statement made by the Lord Chancellor on the broader issues. I am receiving regular briefings on the circumstances leading to the escape of Daniel Khalife yesterday and on the wide-ranging operation involving the police, Border Force and the agencies to track him down.

The right hon. Lady also mentioned resources. Let me be clear that funding for counter-terrorism is as high as it has ever been, and Prevent funding has not been cut. However, we are redirecting resources to better reflect the evolving threat picture, so that our resources are directed at the priorities informed by the intelligence picture. For example, I am very pleased that all local authorities now have a dedicated Home Office point of expertise and contact. That has been rolled out throughout England and Wales. It will properly equip those in the local authority sector to have proper training and a connection, a dialogue and a meaningful relationship with the Home Office so that they can be better tooled up to respond to radicalisation and the risks relating to Prevent in the community.

The right hon. Lady also said there should not be a hierarchy of threats. Of course, there is no such hierarchy. Prevent is ideologically agnostic, but we must always be clear about the facts. When I last updated the House, for example, 80% of live investigations by the counter-terrorism police network were Islamist in nature, and MI5 is clear that Islamist terrorism remains our predominant threat, accounting for 75% of its case load, yet only 16% of Prevent referrals in 2021 were Islamist. That is a fundamental problem that Sir William identified and that I am addressing right now through these robust and wide-ranging reforms.

Prevent is a security service, not a social service. The role of ideology in terrorism has too often been minimised, with violence attributed to vulnerabilities such as mental health or poverty and to the absence of protective factors, rather than focusing on individual responsibility and personal agency in the choices that these people are making.

I am implementing all the review's recommendations, and I have committed to reporting back to the House on progress. I am clear that Prevent must focus solely on security, not on political correctness or appeasing campaign groups. Its first objective must be to tackle the ideological causes of terrorism. We will not be cowed by fear, and we will not be hampered by doubt. I am very grateful to the House for hearing this update.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is welcome that the Home Secretary has come to the House today to update us on the report. I am sure the whole House and the country will be grateful that all the review's recommendations have been accepted. She is absolutely right to say that it is about individuals making individual choices and that there can be no excuses relating to their background or the indoctrination that has taken place. This is about freedom of speech, too. People should not be frightened that Prevent intrudes on freedom of speech. It is about keeping this country safe from terrorism.

Suella Braverman: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that this is about national security and public safety. It is not about appeasing campaign groups or the fear of offending particular minority groups. It is not about putting community cohesion ahead of the interest of national security. I am absolutely clear that our Prevent professionals in all the relevant agencies must work without fear or favour and in the interest of national security first and foremost.

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

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Shawcross review has found that the Prevent strategy has failed and lost its way. The very system that aimed to identify would-be terrorists has allegedly funded a group whose head was sympathetic to the Taliban. That failure is why the Home Secretary is coming to the House today to make a statement. I am sure she will agree that public confidence in the Prevent strategy has been shaken to its foundations. We know that those previously referred to Prevent went on to commit terrorist acts and that the terrorist threat across the UK remains substantial, which means that an attack is likely. What long-term work is being done to monitor those who leave prison after serving sentences to ensure that they do not remain a threat to our communities and national security?

Islamist terrorism is the primary terrorist threat, but it is not the only one. The fact that the Wagner group is to be declared a terrorist organisation has to be welcomed, but there must be ongoing concern and vigilance in respect of extreme and far right incel movements. Questions

about how to tackle online radicalisation remain. Will the Home Secretary assure us that there will be full co-operation with the devolved nations as we seek to tackle the scourge of terrorism? What guarantees will she provide that Prevent will have the necessary budget and resources to fulfil its central aim and mission of preventing terrorism across the UK?

Finally, the Home Secretary talked about better training for prison officers, but staffing crises in our prisons are rife. Training is all well and good, but it is important that the prison estate has the proper manpower levels to play its part in deradicalising and rehabilitating those who have been convicted of terrorist offences, so that when they are released they can go back to their communities without causing alarm. What action is she taking to address the staffing crisis in our prisons, as part of this strategy?

Suella Braverman: The hon. Lady talked about historical Home Office funding of groups linked with extremism, an issue identified by Sir William in his landmark report. I was appalled when I read that Prevent had historically funded groups that have legitimised extremism or has worked with groups whose values totally contradict our own. That is not a proper use of public money, it undermines Prevent's objectives and it is potentially a threat to national security. I will ensure that that never happens again. As a result of that issue identified in the report, we are running a full-scale audit of all counter-extremism funding arrangements and we will immediately terminate all agreements that fall below our standards. We are working closely with the Commission for Countering Extremism to ensure that we strengthen our oversight and vetting procedures to ensure that taxpayers' money always goes to the right groups.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement and her strong leadership on this issue. The additional measures taken by the Ministry of Justice earlier this year to crack down on the activities of terrorist prisoners were very welcome. Is she able to provide an update on any assessments the Home Office, in conjunction with the MOJ, has completed on the success of those measures so far?

Suella Braverman: The Prevent duty applies to those working in the prison estate. Sir William identified a particular concern relating to the threat of radicalism and terrorism occurring and evolving within the prison estate, which is why he made a recommendation. I am pleased that we have made significant progress on rolling out the terrorism risks behaviour profile, which will now enable prison officers to have better training so that they can better spot, and are more confident and knowledgeable about, the signs of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism within the prison estate and are thereafter empowered to take steps to mitigate and eliminate that risk.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In ensuring that Prevent is fit for purpose, the Home Affairs Committee looked at the Prevent review and we were concerned about the under-representation of the Islamist threat in Prevent referrals when compared with right-wing extremism referrals. Some 22% of the 4,915 referrals related to Islamist radicalisation and 25% related to right-wing extremism. However, 75% of those who ended up on remand for terrorist offences were categorised as Islamist and 22% were categorised as extreme right-wing. When the Security Minister appeared before our Committee, he said that the Government needed to look at the reasons for that, and that they were going to look at the misallocation and seek to make sure there was better representation of the actual threat. Will the Home Secretary therefore set out what work has been done to ensure that we have that proper representation in those initial Prevent referrals?

Suella Braverman: We saw exactly that incongruity and disparity between the intelligence picture and the security threat picture, and what was happening on the ground among the Prevent community in the referrals that they were making. That is a problem, which is why today marks an important step forward in rectifying that erroneous approach. The new statutory guidance will focus increasingly on ideological causes of terrorism, and there will be much more stringency and robustness in looking more rigorously at the ideology behind extremism. Importantly, we are also adopting Sir William's recommendation of including the security threat check, which consists of specialist questions that are directly informed by the intelligence and Home Office analysis of the security and counter-terrorism picture. That will form a series of principles that will help to ensure that Prevent referrals on the ground properly reflect the threat picture.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Coming from Greater Manchester, I know tragically what the end result of Islamist indoctrination can be for a community, so I welcome very much the re-emphasis on tackling Islamist indoctrination. In the Home Secretary's reset of the Prevent system, will she explain to the House how she is going to take local communities with her? She knows that one criticism of the Prevent system as it stands is that it also stigmatises whole communities, not just those who are extremists. What confidence is she going to give to diverse communities across the UK?

Suella Braverman: It is not right to say that Prevent is anti-Muslim. Prevent is about ensuring that Islamism, extremism, radicalisation and violent ideology about hatred, evil and values totally at odds with ours are stamped out. The vast majority of British Muslims make a valuable contribution to the UK, but we must be courageous in calling out permissive environments and tolerance for extremism among some parts of our community. That requires a fearless approach, one that is not cowed by political correctness or fear of upsetting particular groups in the name of community cohesion. If we want to save lives, we need to take a united approach, but a robust and fearless one to calling out Islamism when we see it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and for the strength of character and delivery of purpose as well. She referred to discussions about possible support for Scotland. She is right to be strong on radicalisation. Steps have been taken to combat that in Northern Ireland, where the rewriting of history is leading to the glorifying of terrorism

[Jim Shannon]

for a new generation—that must be combatted. Will she confirm the effectiveness of Prevent in all areas of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Suella Braverman: As I mentioned when we refreshed our Contest strategy, we are seeing a concerning level of terrorism related to Northern Ireland. That is a very sorry reflection of unacceptable behaviour, which must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. Our agencies work UK-wide and we are always working closely with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other authorities at the local level, to ensure that all leads are followed in the fullest possible way and measures are put in place to mitigate risks as they emerge. However, as we saw earlier this year, that threat is a concern and we must remain vigilant to it.

EU Programmes

12.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): This is a momentous day for British science and technology as we have negotiated a great landmark deal, designed in the UK's best interest. A hard-fought-for deal that will allow the UK's world-leading scientists, researchers and businesses to participate with total confidence in both Horizon Europe and Copernicus, it gives the best and brightest of the UK's scientific community access to the world's largest research collaboration programme.

It means British scientists and businesses can co-operate with researchers not just in the EU, but in Norway, New Zealand and Israel, expanding the reach and impact of British science and technology to every corner of the globe. With Korea and Canada looking to join these programmes in the future, we are opening the doors to further pioneering, international collaboration with a growing group of countries.

We were always clear that we wanted to associate with Horizon and that is why we had it in the trade and co-operation agreement. However, as hon. Members know only too well, we were not able to commence those negotiations over the last two years because the European Union had linked it to the Northern Ireland protocol. However, our Prime Minister's Windsor framework broke the deadlock and allowed us to commence negotiations.

We said all along that we would accept only a good deal, which is why we did not take the first deal on the table. Instead, we pursued a bespoke agreement that delivers for British taxpayers, researchers and businesses. We will not pay for a second of the time in which we were not members of the programme, and our deal protects and benefits hardworking taxpayers through a new clawback mechanism.

What is more, our scientists and researchers can benefit from Horizon today, meaning they can immediately bid into the programme, with certainty over funding. All calls in the 2024 work programme, including those that open for bids this year, will be funded through our association to Horizon, while the few remaining 2023 work programme calls will be funded by the UK guarantee.

But this is not just about Horizon. We needed a bespoke deal that gave us access only to EU programmes that would benefit the UK, not to those that would not. Listening to voices from our world-leading fusion sector, we will not be joining Euratom. Instead, we are investing an additional £650 million straight into our cutting-edge fusion sector, assisting our journey to becoming a science and technology superpower by 2030.

When I first started in this role, I made it my No.1 priority to listen to the voices and views of the scientific and tech communities. What I heard loud and clear was how essential associating to Horizon Europe was for the sector, and I am delighted that this Government have now delivered on that. The deal we have negotiated has been warmly welcomed by the whole of the scientific community. It gives it the certainty it needs to continue delivering long-term research and innovation, and it will enable it to change people's lives and have a truly global outlook. Members do not need to take my word for it; today's announcement has been supported by

Universities UK, the Russell Group, all four of our prestigious national academies, leading tech businesses, including Airbus and Rolls Royce, and countless more.

The deal is not just about funding and support for universities, businesses and scientists. It is a deal that has a real-world impact for people and communities throughout the UK. This deal is set to create and support thousands of new jobs as part of a new generation of research talent who are attracted to the UK and work across the globe. The deal we have negotiated will allow the UK to continue to play a leading role on the international stage in solving the biggest challenges that we face, from climate change and the race to net zero to cures for cancer, dementia and other life-threatening diseases.

Alongside this deal, the Government are proudly backing our science and tech communities. We have committed to invest £20 billion in research and development by the next financial year. That means more record funding on wider priorities, from harnessing the power of AI to improving our public services to tapping the potential of quantum computing. We will continue to strengthen our collaboration with countries beyond Europe, building on the success of the international science partnership fund we launched earlier this year, to deliver our truly global science approach with global benefits.

Today we take another giant leap forward in our mission to make Britain a science and tech superpower. I am confident that scientists and businesses are ready to seize the moment. The horizon could not really be brighter for British science and technology. I commend the statement to the House.

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

12.46 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In a past life, I was a university lecturer. I have to say that, if one of my students had turned up to hand in an assessment two years late, I would not have been terribly amused. I do not think anyone could be very amused by the two wasted years here. On science policy in this country, we have a classic case of lions being led by donkeys.

Britain is blessed with many of the world's greatest innovators: the developers of the covid vaccine and the internet, cancer specialists and green energy pioneers. We are home to those who are at the vanguard of research, yet they have been failed by this Conservative Government time and again. They have left our researchers locked out of the world's leading scientific collaboration project, worth over £80 billion, for the past two years. It has been like keeping Lionel Messi or England's Lucy Bronze out of the World cup.

We have already seen reports of cancer research specialists leaving the UK to pick up Horizon projects elsewhere, while we have lost two years of funding rounds. That vital ground has been lost and cannot be revived, despite a promise in the Conservatives' 2019 manifesto. That is what happens when bluster and division are put above delivering for people.

The Secretary of State spoke about the link with the Windsor framework. It was this Conservative Government who negotiated the Northern Ireland protocol in the first place and it is little wonder this Government have presided over such anaemic economic growth. So although the long-delayed confirmation of association to Horizon and Copernicus will be a relief, it cannot undo the damage that has already been caused and leaves serious questions for the Government to answer.

In her statement, the Secretary of State spoke about some of the costs, but can she set out the precise quantum of the financial contribution to Horizon and the other schemes in the years ahead? Has any financial disadvantage been accrued through missing out on the first years of the scheme? Could she confirm how the UK's position as an associate member of Horizon impacts our ability to strategically shape the future of the Horizon programme? How do we ensure terms that are advantageous for our research communities?

I heard the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), chuntering earlier. He will probably recall his contribution to this debate:

> "Of the three—Euratom, Copernicus and Horizon—Euratom is probably the hardest of all to reproduce…I still think of them very much as a bundle. We would like to remain in all three, but, if I had to pick one, Euratom is the one".

Those were his words, but the agreement does not include association to Euratom. Can the Secretary of State outline what risks that might impose for international collaboration and energy security?

In short, today's announcement is long overdue. It leaves vital questions outstanding. What I have no doubt about is that our brilliant scientific community can rise to the challenges and make the best of the hand that they have been dealt. I have no doubt either, I am afraid, that we cannot go on being held back by this chaotic Conservative Government who are a drag anchor on so much that makes Britain great.

Michelle Donelan: I welcome the right hon. Member to his position. I am delighted that the Opposition have finally got round to appointing a ministerial team to shadow the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology—it took them six months, but they did get there in the end.

I am also delighted that the right hon. Member has acknowledged the significance of this Government deal, but to address his point about the delay, he knows only too well that it was the European Union that linked Horizon association directly with the Northern Ireland protocol and it is this Government and this Prime Minister who managed to unlock that with the Windsor framework. It is also this Government who bridged that gap with the Horizon guarantee, spending more than £1 billion.

As soon as the framework was agreed, I was the first to hop on the train to Brussels to see the commissioner to ensure that we could kickstart that negotiation. At the time, I was eight and a half months pregnant, but I thought that that was vital to our sector and I am glad that we are able to deliver today. One thing I will not do is apologise for the Government wanting to get a good deal. Let us remember it was the Opposition who called for us to accept the deal on the table back in March. If we had done that, we would not have this good deal for our taxpayers, our businesses, our scientists and our researchers. I have already—it was in the statement—

[Michelle Donelan]

clarified the point that we will not pay for one moment that we were not associated with Horizon, but I reiterate that point.

To answer some of the right hon. Member's other questions, the cost will be £2 billion a year and, as I have said, we are injecting £650 million directly into our fusion sector. On Euratom, the Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation agrees with me that it is the right strategy to proceed with Horizon and Copernicus, but not with Euratom. It is not just we who believe that. The Fusion Industry Association has welcomed the UK Government's ambitious package of £650 million. Ian Chapman has said that he welcomes the clarity over our future relationship. In fact the association made representations directly to us in order to ensure that we put the money directly into our sector.

This is a great deal for Britain, for the taxpayer, for businesses, for scientists and for researchers. We believe that our country has the potential to be a science and tech superpower. It is a shame that the Opposition do not.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): Science does not recognise borders, and everyone wins when the best UK scientists can work with the best in the EU and around the world, so this is a huge and positive announcement and has been greeted with delight and relief not just by the science community in the UK, but across Europe and beyond.

My Select Committee, the members of which are in the Chamber, will examine the deal in detail, but may I congratulate the Secretary of State, her Minister and the whole of the Government on what seems to be a shrewd agreement that, for example, allows us to win grants even beyond our own financial contribution? Will she confirm that Horizon funding is available not just to academic institutions, but for innovation by British industry? Has she consulted formally the UK Atomic Energy Authority, which runs our fusion programme, about not participating in Euratom and, if so, what is its view? Does she agree that, with the reputation of British science as high as it is, with the science budget doubling as it has over the past 10 years to £20 billion a year by next year, and with now the opportunities of rejoining Horizon opening up, this is a golden opportunity for the UK to advance our status as a science superpower?

Michelle Donelan: I could not agree more with my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee. I am delighted that he has welcomed this announcement today. In relation to his comments on Euratom, we did consult widely the sector and the UK AEA, which has welcomed this publicly, along with many stakeholders, including the business community, which will also benefit from this announcement today.

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

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): The SNP welcomes this move, which will provide much-needed certainty and kickstart new research opportunities for key strength areas of the Scottish economy, including life sciences. The Prime Minister himself has said that rejoining this EU scheme is

"critical to a brighter economic future".

But the SNP believes that rejoining the EU as a full member state is much more critical than that. Unfortunately, I know that this Government, and probably the incoming Labour Government, strongly disagree with that, to the detriment of Scotland.

Securing Horizon association is a matter of pressing importance. We must not forget that universities and members of the research community in Scotland have missed out on their share of the all-important funding provided by the €95.5 billion European research and innovation programme since the UK Government's decision to pursue a hard Brexit.

We are disappointed that Euratom is not going to be pursued and is being taken separately. Although we welcome the funding, I think we all agree that it is much better that we work in conjunction with our European neighbours. Scotland has also been locked out of Copernicus, so what is the status of re-entering that and, indeed, the Erasmus+ scheme?

Michelle Donelan: We will not be rejoining the EU under this Government because we believe in democracy. On Euratom, the best people to listen to are the sector themselves, who told us directly and clearly that they would be better off with the money going straight to them and that is what we have done. We have listened to the sectors involved and we have delivered. This is a fantastic deal that creates many opportunities for businesses, scientists and researchers. It is not to be confused with Erasmus, which the hon. Member raised. That is a separate scheme. In fact, it was this Government, and I personally when I worked in the Department for Education, who established the Turing scheme, which is better than Erasmus because it is global in nature and supports those from different backgrounds.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Perhaps I could declare an interest: in my previous job, I was one of the six European Parliament rapporteurs involved in setting up the initial Horizon 2020 project and the only one from the United Kingdom. What I learnt during the five years that I worked on that project was that this is not just for Nobel prize winners or mega companies; it is also for researchers at the start of their careers, for innovators and for less well-known companies such as Teledyne e2v in Chelmsford, which provides our eyes and ears to world space programmes.

What I heard time and again was that, if we create an opportunity for scientists plus researchers and combine that with the ability to work across borders and across disciplines, we will have a formula that will often result in better innovation and more effective solutions to some of the world's trickiest problems. May I thank the Prime Minister, his ministerial team and all those on the EU side—for there were many—who continued to press to have British science in these programmes? It is a great deal for Britain, for all of us on the continent of Europe and for all of us who live in this world.

Michelle Donelan: My right hon. Friend speaks a lot of sense. I thank her for her thanks, and for those to the Prime Minister and the negotiating team, who have

done us proud in bringing home a deal that will truly deliver. I know that this is something that she has worked on considerably in her time and is passionate about.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am very relieved by today's statement, hopefully just in the nick of time to avoid really serious damage to UK science. I welcome it, and particularly applaud the contribution made by the Minister for Science, which I know has been very important to achieving this outcome. We are gaining associate membership of Horizon. To what extent does that give us a seat at the table to influence the future shape of the programme?

Michelle Donelan: We will be able to lead projects from 2024. Most of the projects open at the moment—80% to 90%—are for 2024, and we have the opportunity to lead them, so we can be at the forefront of this agenda.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. It will be warmly welcomed by the scientific community across the United Kingdom. It might even be described as one small step for her but a giant leap for British science. Will she comment particularly on Arctic science, as 78 universities or other institutions are looking into matters in the Arctic at this moment? They will warmly welcome the rejoining of Horizon, but I want to hear from her a particular commitment by the British Government to further support British science in the Arctic. It is such an important area with regard to climate change and other things, and I want to hear that she and her hon. Friend, the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, who does great work on these matters, is fully committed to supporting British science in the Arctic.

Michelle Donelan: I know that my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour does a great deal of work on this as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, with a keen interest in this area. We have a fantastic track record when it comes to Arctic science, being fourth in the world, and we want to climb up that league table. Membership of Horizon Europe will certainly help us to achieve that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The announcement that the UK will rejoin Horizon is very welcome, and I am very pleased about it, but there is so much more to be done to restore academic co-operation with the EU, especially for students. The Turing scheme is currently on a very sad par with the Erasmus programme. The University of Bath, as the right hon. Member will know, is a science university. As University of Bath students point out, the Turing scheme requires universities to forecast where students will go before their bid for funding, a year in advance. It restricts the freedom of students and creates a major challenge for universities. Will she work with the students' union at the University of Bath to ensure that Turing will work as smoothly as Erasmus?

Michelle Donelan: I am more than happy to work with the Department for Education and co-ordinate a conversation with the University of Bath, but it is important to note that the Turing scheme is different from Erasmus; it is better. It is global in nature. It is also more inclusive. The statistics on the Erasmus scheme show that it particularly helped children of families from middle-class backgrounds, whereas the Turing scheme is much more accessible.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State and her Science Minister on a fantastic deal, which the scaremongers said could never happen. They said that we had to take what we were offered. We did not, and we have an excellent deal. Later today, I hope that the Science Minister will respond to a debate that I will lead on fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, a terrible genetic condition where muscle turns to bone, restricting the life chances of so many people, including some of my constituents who are here. There was a Horizon project looking into this, but it was suspended because of covid. Will we be allowed to go back into that, even though we have had this period of time out, or is that something that the Science Minister would like to write to me about?

Michelle Donelan: The Science Minister has agreed to meet with our right hon. Friend and discuss this at great length.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his timely and positive action following my question to him yesterday. I welcome the news, which comes as a huge relief to the research community after so much prolonged uncertainty. Can the Secretary of State assure the chief executive of Cancer Research UK, who welcomes the Government's decision and has expressed the hope that this deal will pave the way for continued UK participation in future European research programmes?

Michelle Donelan: The hon. Member's question to the Prime Minister was indeed timely. I can give her that assurance. One of the key missions of Horizon Europe focuses on tackling and addressing cancer, and that will continue to be key.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on today's announcement that the UK will be rejoining Horizon. Scientific research opportunities are vital to the development of our future industries. However, young people in rural parts of the country, such as North Devon, often do not see the possibilities of a career in science. Will she work with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that the opportunities from today's announcement extend right into our remote rural communities?

Michelle Donelan: It is vital that the opportunities that young people have are not capped by the location where they live or are born, and that is certainly a key part of our levelling-up agenda. When it comes to rural communities, agri-tech is absolutely at the heart of the areas that we are focusing on. Horizon Europe will open up those potential collaborations across the globe.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a relief that the EU has relaxed its rather self-defeating ban on the participation of British scientists and researchers in projects with their European peers. I congratulate the Government on holding fast to achieve a deal that was in the best interests of British taxpayers. I will probe the

[Richard Fuller]

Secretary of State on three specific points. She talked about the opportunity for the UK to lead projects, but she did not say that the UK will have the right to determine the focus of projects in the future. I am interested in that specific point.

Secondly, it is always important to have all the brains in the building working on projects. Will the UK have the opportunity post 2027 to see the Horizon programme expand beyond its existing members? Thirdly, will she reassure the House that the Government's commitment, which they have shown year on year, to increase research and development spending will continue to focus on the competitive interests of the UK first and foremost?

Michelle Donelan: We are confident that we will be able to use the Horizon programme to collaborate on areas of shared interest, including on strategically sensitive technologies, such as chips and semiconductors. Given the deal that we have agreed, we will be able to play a leading role within the Horizon agenda, and help to guide it through and expand it. Future association would, of course, be for future Governments to determine, but I am confident that our scientific community will seize this opportunity, utilise it, and prove how valuable membership of Horizon Europe is. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his interest in these topics.

Points of Order

1.7 pm

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. A few moments ago the Secretary of State inadvertently promoted me to the position of Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee —our right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Philip Dunne) would have been surprised and disappointed to hear that. I am in fact Chair of the Environmental Audit Sub-Committee on Polar Research, which is looking into the Arctic. I wonder whether my right hon. Friend might like to correct the record.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure that it is only a matter of time, but I correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State for between them correcting the record.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to correct the record following my question to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs this morning. Since raising the matter, I have received an update from my local council that Afghan families expected this week are no longer coming from hotels to North Devon. This is an ongoing process, but we hope to welcome further refugees to North Devon in the near future.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for notifying me of it. We have had a lot of correcting of the record in these points of order, but her speed in doing so has been exemplary.

Backbench Business

Hormone Pregnancy Tests

1.9 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that children were born with serious deformities due to the hormone pregnancy test drug Primodos, which was taken by expectant mothers between 1953 and 1975; further notes that official warnings were not issued about Primodos until eight years after the first reports indicated possible dangers; observes that the report by the Commission on Human Medicines' Expert Working Group on Hormone Pregnancy Tests in 2017 was inconsistent with other academic reports; notes that the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review, First do no harm, found that Primodos caused avoidable harm; further notes that the Government has refused to acknowledge the recommendations by the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review relating to Primodos families; and calls on the Government to fully implement the recommendations in the Independent Medicines and Medica al Devices Safety Review and to set up a redress fund for families affected by Primodos.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. This is now the fifth time we have had a debate trying to persuade the Government to grant justice to families affected by Primodos. I cannot even begin to count the number of times in the last 12 years that this issue has been raised on the Floor of this House during Prime Minister's questions, Health questions, business questions and even Treasury questions. Time and again, this Government have insisted that there is no credible evidence to support an association between Primodos and deformities. Indeed, they have gone to great lengths to try to prove that there is no association at all.

I remind this House that Primodos was a tablet given to patients by their general practitioner as a pregnancy test. It was 40 times—I repeat, 40 times—the strength of an oral contraceptive today. It does not take a scientist to imagine what a dosage of that strength would do to a foetus. Babies were born with severe deformities, babies who are now adults in their 40s and 50s and have lived their whole lives with these disabilities.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I take the hon. Lady back a few moments to the tablets that were given by the patient's GP in a national health surgery, paid for by the national health, and the doctor was paid by the national health? It was not private clinics, but the national health giving this drug.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is important to stress that it was the state, the NHS, involved in this.

In July 2015, I stood in this House and urged the Government to disclose all the evidence they had and to set up an independent inquiry. The then Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), heard those concerns and agreed to an independent review, which would be led by an expert working group.

However, first, the expert working group was not independent. In fact, many of the experts were found to have conflicts of interest with the industry. Secondly, the review of the evidence conveniently ignored several important studies and then later said, "Oh, well, there was insufficient evidence." Thirdly, the terms of reference of the review had said that it would try to find a possible link. Yet the reports' conclusion said it was unable to find a "causal link". How exactly does the Government intend to find a causal link, short of testing the drug on pregnant women?

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On that point about evidence, so many medical records were destroyed. How is it possible to have an absolute evidential base for the reports, when the evidence seems to have been destroyed?

Yasmin Qureshi: That is absolutely right; I thank my hon. Friend for that point.

I am pleased to see the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) in the Chamber. I know that, as Prime Minister at the time, she read this report. I note that in a recent Sky News interview she said

"I felt that it wasn't the slam dunk answer that people said it was."

I am truly grateful to her for commissioning Baroness Cumberlege to carry out a review that was both independent and credible.

Knowing what we now know, that the expert working group report was a whitewash, riddled with factual inaccuracies and conflicts of interest; knowing that studies from Oxford University have proven that the evidence in this report was deliberately manipulated to reach its conclusion; knowing that the Prime Minister of the day knew something was not right and then commissioned another review—how can it be right that any Government can continue to use this report to hide their sins?

Only a few weeks ago, lawyers used the report in court to defend their preposterous claims, and Ministers have used it as a basis to refuse and deny families redress. It is outrageous. I ask the Minister today: will she take a stand and do the right thing? Will she be courageous and read beyond the lines of the ministerial briefing she has been given? Only then will she agree with me that the expert working group report is not worth the paper it is written on.

The report stands in the way of justice for families affected by Primodos. I urge the Minister to work with us to set up an independent review of the scientific evidence, because I can assure her that only a truly independent review will find that there is an association between Primodos and malformation.

The scientific evidence is vast. Over several decades, numerous studies and animal experiments have found that the use of such tests can cause potential birth defects. In 2018, a team of academics at Oxford University conducted a systematic review of all previous human studies. They pooled together the data and found a "clear association" with several forms of malformation. At Aberdeen University, Professor Neil Vargesson has been working on this issue for years. He published research on zebrafish, which are genetically like humans, and found that the drug caused deformities in embryos. More recently, he has been working with human tissues and has again found the same association. There is another groundbreaking study take place in Sweden, which will be published soon. Again, that will continue to show how much evidence there is regarding this particular medication.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

I have no doubt that later in the debate the Minister will stand at the Dispatch Box and tell the House that there is nothing she can do for the Primodos families because there is no proven association, because she has been convinced by the civil servants, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and others. Would she like me to send her some of these studies—or perhaps I can hand them to her today? Is she willing to confront the truth, or is she going to be like her predecessors, burying her head in the sand? As long as she takes that position, she is standing in the way of truth and justice.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that since the Cumberlege report there has not been progress on the vast majority of recommendations, and that for Primodos families time is running out? This issue needs to be addressed, and soon.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend for that; I will come on to the recommendations of the Cumberlege review.

The Minister will know that in May this year, families took the issue to the High Court. It was a David and Goliath moment. Government and Bayer lawyers used the expert working group report to argue that there was no basis for a case. The families did not have sufficient legal representation, as the firm representing them on a pro bono basis pulled out without any real explanation. It was not a fair hearing and was never going to achieve a fair outcome.

The action to strike out thus succeeded. Had that not happened, the families would have been given their day in court—an opportunity to present new scientific evidence, to argue about the misconceptions of not using epidemiological evidence to prove causation and to scrutinise the heavily flawed expert working group.

When the Cumberlege review came out, the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), went on the television and apologised, but nothing has happened since then. For the first time, the Cumberlege review, known as the "Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review" or IMMDS, looked at the historical evidence and the Government documents, which showed a cover-up, and concluded that Primodos had caused "avoidable harm" and it was preventable.

The UK regulator first received a warning about the drug in 1958. A definitive study was published in 1967, which linked birth defects to the synthetic hormones in Primodos. Baroness Cumberlege concluded that Primodos should have been removed from the market in 1967. The UK regulator failed in its duty of care to women: Primodos was eventually withdrawn in 1978, 20 years after the first warning.

Let me be clear by saying it one more time: an independent review found that Primodos caused preventable and avoidable harm—the Government cannot argue their way out of that—and recommended that the Primodos families should have redress. If the Minister wants to waste time by arguing that the Cumberlege review was not a scientific one, then we can have an independent review of all the scientific evidence, but let us not waste time; let us get on with it.

The families have already been through so much in their lives. Many of them have died, others are still very unwell. Why do the Government still insist on putting them through so much emotional and mental anguish? I ask the Minister to look at the Public Gallery, where some of those families sit, having travelled from across the country. Their campaign has been led by the amazing Marie Lyon, and they have been on a long and challenging journey, spanning almost five decades, to achieve justice. Their stories are at the heart of that justice. Those in the Gallery are just some of the families, but there are many hundreds more.

Justice delayed is justice denied. The legal system has failed those families, and so far the Government have failed them as well. I ask the Government to include Primodos families in the redress scheme being delivered to the victims of mesh and valproate as a result of the recommendation in the IMMDS/Cumberlege review. This was once referred to as the worst medical fraud of the 20th century, and I believe that to be true. The families are entitled to seek reparation and redress, as the Cumberlege review made clear. The Minister has an opportunity. She has it in her power to dispense justice and grant the affected families the redress that they rightly deserve. The ball is in her court.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This debate is well subscribed, so my advice to colleagues is to keep speeches to around seven minutes so that we can get the next debate in as well.

1.22 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to the debate, and most of all I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing it. She has been an intrepid campaigner on this issue over many years, as have other Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who has another important debate later this afternoon on fibrodysplasia ossificans progressive. I am afraid I will not be able to attend, but I recognise the significance of that issue.

I will focus on three issues in the time available to me. I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Bolton South East: it is a pity that we have to be here yet again, making these arguments to Government. Up until recently, the Government have been able to say in debates that they could not do or say anything because a legal case was going through the courts. Well, that case is no longer in the courts, as a result of the decision taken by Lady Justice Yip, so the Government's position today should be rather different. We will wait and see in the Minister's response.

The other thing that the Government have done is hide behind the expert working group report, which the hon. Lady referred to. Many issues have been related to the expert working group report, which of course found in its overall conclusion that

"the available scientific evidence, taking all aspects into consideration, does not support a causal association between the use of HPTs, such as Primodos, during early pregnancy and adverse outcomes, either with regard to miscarriage, stillbirth or congenital anomalies"

Given that conclusion, it might seem rather strange to the Minister and the House that it was that very report that led to my setting up the Cumberlege review. The reason I did so was that earlier in the report it says:

"The totality of the available evidence from pharmacology, non-clinical, epidemiological and adverse event reporting data was very limited and did not, on balance, support a causal association between the use of HPTs, such as Primodos, by the mother during early pregnancy and congenital anomalies in the child."

To me, "on balance" means that there was an argument against a causal link and, on the other side, an argument for a causal link, so the strength of the absolute decision that the expert working group came out with was, I think, a misrepresentation of what they had put earlier in the report. It was that sense of a balanced argument that led me to call for the Cumberlege review.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the right hon. Lady for the work that she did as Prime Minister to set up the Cumberlege review. May I take her back to her first point? She said rightly that the Government have been refusing to take forward the recommendations of the review because of the legal case, and that that case has now come to an end. Is she aware that the defendants in that case, including the Government, have sent letters to some of the applicants saying that they must sign away their right to take forward any further legal cases or be faced with, and pressured by, millions of pounds in legal costs? Does she agree that for the Government solicitor to be part of that process, and threatening those families, is quite atrocious?

Mrs May: I was not aware of that. I am very concerned by the situation that the right hon. Gentleman sets out, and I hope that the Government will urgently consider the position that their solicitors have been taking on that issue.

The second issue I will raise is the very important matter of redress. Let me refer first to the timeline. The report that everybody looks at as, in a sense, the first report of a potential causal link between Primodos and birth defects was, of course, the report led by Isabel Gal in 1967. There had been earlier indications of potential problems, and there have continued to be indications up until most recently. But it is not just that the NHS, through its various regulatory regimes, did not act on the basis of the 1967 report; later, even when Primodos was being withdrawn in other countries, it continued to be available to women here in the UK. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead rightly said in his intervention, we are not talking about some private clinics and doctors; we are talking about GPs in the national health service. It is that issue of responsibility that the Government need to address; that is important in relation to redress.

The Cumberlege committee said that the independent redress agency

"should be created based on models operating effectively in other countries."

There are other countries where this issue has been recognised and redress is available. A redress scheme is being worked on for sodium valproate and for pelvic mesh. Why not for Primodos? I sincerely hope, now that the constraints of the legal case have been removed, that the Minister will be able to give a positive indication at the end of the debate that the Government will indeed consider redress for those who took Primodos and those who have suffered as a result.

My final point is one that was made to me recently by Marie Lyon. Women who took Primodos, and who saw their children suffer, often feel guilty; they feel somehow that it was them and their fault. It was not. They have no reason to feel guilty at all. The drug was given to them by their GPs. I hope that the Minister will stand up and say very clearly that women who took Primodos and whose children suffered were not in any way at fault and should not feel guilty at all. The fault lay with the NHS.

1.28 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). I pay tribute to the work she has done and place on record my thanks to the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, which is very ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who secured the debate. She demonstrated her passionate support for those affected by this great injustice that it has taken far too long to put right.

I would also like to mention the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, led by the redoubtable Marie Lyon, whom we all know and have met, as well as our constituents who have been subject to the terrible effects of taking Primodos in their pregnancies. Both the APPG and the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests have campaigned tirelessly—this year marks a decade of the APPG—for countless families who have had their lives irrevocably changed by the impact of Primodos.

Locally, my constituent Marjorie Lancaster-Smith has long been an active campaigner within these groups and has shared with me at length the impact that Primodos has had on her family. Following the use of Primodos during Marjorie's pregnancy, her daughter Tania has complex heart and intestinal problems, which she has had to live with her entire life. These have impacted both Tania and the family as a whole, and she has had several periods of severe ill health, operations and complications that have been life-threatening on several occasions. Both Marjorie and Tania are missing vital medical records—in fact, there are none at all for the first few years of Tania's life or for Marjorie's pregnancy. It is therefore very difficult to have definitive proof of exactly what happened to them. This is a convenient omission—that is all I am going to say.

This campaign has been incredibly trying for many families, as they have often felt sidelined and stonewalled at every turn as they pursue justice for their now grown-up children. However, as this debate and those attending it today demonstrate, they remain determined to win their campaign for answers and redress. As Marjorie movingly put it in one of our recent communications,

"Nevertheless while there is breath in my body, I will continue to support my daughter and all our members who struggle every day because of the damage caused by Primodos. It is an absolute disgrace that they have not received justice and that Bayer"—

the pharmaceutical company that manufactured this drug—

"and the Government think they can just walk away scot-free."

In the three years since Baroness Cumberlege's independent medicines and medical devices safety review reported, we have seen long overdue work undertaken

[Dame Angela Eagle]

to support those impacted by pelvic mesh and sodium valproate, including the development of redress schemes, but Primodos victims have had no action whatsoever—indeed, there has been total silence and avoidance. I echo the point made by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead that as the legal process has now ended, what ended with it was the Government's latest excuse for not pursuing some form of redress. I hope that the Minister is able to reassure us that that position has now changed.

As other Members have highlighted, the all-party parliamentary group has three clear asks of the Government, which I hope the Minister will address when she responds: first, that the sensible and necessary recommendations made in the independent medicines and medical devices safety review relating to Primodos be implemented, including the creation of a redress fund for the families affected; secondly, that there is an acknowledgment of and explanation for the present lack of implementation of those recommendations, because it has now been a long time—three years; and finally, the withdrawal of the highly disputed findings of the expert working group, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East talked about. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead has called those findings into question, and she explained in her contribution why she did that.

Families such as Marjorie's are long overdue answers for this miscarriage of justice, and they are all desperate to ensure that no further families suffer the adverse consequences of medicines they take or medical devices they have been given by the NHS without having access to redress much more quickly. They have endured great suffering, and they will continue to experience that suffering as a product of the use of Primodos during pregnancy. That suffering cannot be diminished, and it is a tragedy that they have had to wait so long and been so neglected, and that they are now being stalled just when they thought that finally, after years of campaigning, their suffering and the adverse effects had been recognised. I call on the Government to build on the statements of previous Ministers and finally take action to implement the recommendations of the review in full—critically, including the consideration of a redress scheme specifically for Primodos-affected families.

1.35 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I thank the hon. Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and pay tribute to all the work they have done. I also thank Beccy's family, who I am going to talk about today and who I met recently, and Beccy. Beccy's family are sitting in the Gallery today.

This is Beccy and her mum Helen's story. In 1970, when Helen thought she was pregnant, she went to her doctor in Wrexham, north Wales, to confirm the pregnancy. At the time, Helen, aged 24, was a mature student at a teacher training college. Her husband had just got a job in Stourbridge, and she was living with her parents while completing her college course and needed to be sure about the pregnancy as soon as possible. At the time, there was no reliable simple pregnancy test available. The GP said that there was a new product available, which would be the quickest way to confirm the pregnancy. He produced two pills from his desk, for which there was no prescription. The drug was Primodos. These were to be taken on consecutive days. If she was not pregnant, she would have a period within a few days. If she was pregnant, there would be no period. Helen's medical record confirms that she took Primodos in March 1970.

By way of an explainer about Primodos, the same components that are in Primodos are contained in oral contraceptives, but at 40 times the strength of a contraceptive—40 times. That puts it in context. At the time, the doctor explained that the tablets came with a warning that they should not be used for pregnancy testing if the woman was not young and healthy. For example, they should not be used if the woman was older or suffering with conditions such as diabetes or heart problems. None of this applied to Helen—she was only 24—so he decided that this would be the best way to confirm whether she was pregnant.

Beccy was born on 7 November 1970. Her mum had a normal pregnancy and a normal birth. Beccy weighed in at 8 lb 4 oz and appeared a bonny, normal baby. At first, Beccy appeared to develop normally, though she did have many screaming sessions. As first-time parents, they did not think this unusual. Beccy seemed generally fit and healthy, though it seemed that she was not developing as other babies were. When she did not sit up, roll over or crawl at the expected times, her mum was told that she was just being a fussy young mother, but as Beccy got older, it became apparent that she was severely handicapped.

Beccy has never walked and has always been wheelchair dependent. She has curvature of the spine and some deformation of her hands and feet. She had an operation to try to straighten one of her feet when she was six. These problems are worsening as she gets older. Her mental impairments are very severe. She has had many diagnoses including cerebral palsy and autism, and this leads to very complex and challenging behaviours. She will often go days without food and refuse to co-operate with her carers. She has very limited speech, though it is believed she understands much more than she is capable of expressing. This can be very frustrating, and she is often reduced to very distressing screaming sessions. Beccy has been subjected to innumerable tests and procedures, including full genetic screening. There has been no explanation or cause for her impairments. Primodos is the only common denominator.

Beccy lives in a residential home with 24-hour care. She can do virtually nothing without help. She does stay at home with her family regularly, which is very important to her and her family; when she is at home, she relies on her family for all her needs, but that is becoming more and more difficult with age. It is also very distressing for her mum, who is terrified about what will happen to Beccy when she is not around. I have nothing but admiration for Beccy's family, and it was a no-brainer that I would want to speak in today's debate, especially as I am not sure that anyone is giving the families a fair hearing.

The history of Primodos has been well described, so I just want to highlight the issues that are pressing for this family. The first is the report of the expert working group in 2017. The working procedures of the EWG and the conclusions of its report have been widely criticised, and the family are now seeking a properly independent review of them. They believe that such a

review is necessary for acknowledgement and justice for their daughter. They want to be listened to, and I want them to be listened to. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and others have talked about the fact that these were not private clinics: it was the NHS that issued Primodos, so I think we are all looking for that redress.

I therefore want to raise with the Minister the necessity of a fully independent review of the expert working group report, so that all these families and individuals can be heard. After all, the first warning signs of harm were in 1958, when a Dr Edwards said that Primodos can cause damage to the foetus in the early stages of pregnancy. It is not something that has just come to light; it is something that has continually been raised as an issue. Many more warnings were forwarded to the Committee on Safety of Medicines, the UK regulator, from 1958 to 1967. All of those warnings were suppressed by the committee and Primodos remained on the market until 1978—20 years after the first warning was received by the UK regulator. These families want a fair hearing, and I believe they deserve one. I support the family 100% in their call for the UK regulator to stop protecting the drug companies and start protecting women and children.

So that is Beccy's story. It tugs at the heartstrings. Not only has Beccy been robbed of a normal life; the effect on the family has been all-consuming. However, her story is not a one-off. The context to Beccy's story is simple: her mum took Primodos at the age of 24 to establish whether she was pregnant, because she was advised to do so. Primodos contains the same components as oral contraceptives, as I mentioned, but at 40 times the strength. We do not have to be medical experts to work that one out.

1.42 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is always a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb). I think the whole House is grateful to her for telling the story of her constituents and their daughter Beccy. It is so important that the Minister and colleagues hear the impact that Primodos has had on ordinary families, and why we need justice.

I have been involved in this campaign for nearly a decade, but there are three women who have been critical in leading it. The first is the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has chaired the APPG, but who has also done many more things: she has had more meetings, asked more questions and sent more letters, and we are all grateful to her. She is one of the greatest campaigners this House has seen in recent times. Like others, I also pay tribute to Marie Lyon and her husband, who have campaigned with more courage and bravery than I have seen from anyone outside this House in my time here. They are relentless, representing the interests of thousands of women and their families. They are not going to give up until they get that justice, and neither should we.

The third woman I want to mention is a lady called Sue Ilsley, the constituent who brought this issue to my attention. Sadly, Sue died earlier this year. I actually got to know her before this, because she was a campaigner on mental health issues in my constituency; as far as I was concerned, she was the best campaigner. I think that was partly because her mental health had been impacted by her experience of having taken Primodos as a teenager and then giving birth to a daughter—a wonderful daughter, but a daughter who had serious deformities as a result of Primodos. She campaigned on mental health, and later she brought the Primodos issue to me. When I used to speak to her, I could obviously feel her hurt and her anger, but just as the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, I could also feel her guilt. She should not have had any.

There are guilty people. The right hon. Lady mentioned the NHS, but I want to take it back: Schering, the original drug company that has now been bought by Bayer, bears a lot of the guilt. All the professionals and the various medical regulators who have looked at this issue over the years bear the guilt. We should not finish campaigning until those guilty people are brought to justice. Experts and judges have looked at this recently and said, "They are not guilty"—well, they are. Look at the evidence. The expert working group was shocking, and when the right hon. Lady was Prime Minister, she was quite right not to accept its report and to go for the review. We had a debate in 2019 in which that report was pulled apart, and we have seen the work of Carl Heneghan, Neil Vargesson and others, who have proved as scientists and statistical experts that the evidence is overwhelming.

I am not a scientist or a medic, but I can sort of understand legal notes, and when I spoke in this House in December 2017, I read extensive extracts from the minutes of meetings held on 20 and 21 December 1977 at the Goldsmith Building, Temple, London. Schering, the original pharmaceutical company, was getting legal advice from a Mr Clothier QC. I will not repeat that speech today, but I will repeat a few of the things that I mentioned:

> "Mr Clothier felt, if the case were tried to the end by a judge, the chances were that the company would be found to be in neglect of its duty."

This was in 1977.

> "Clothier stated that there seemed to be a 5:1 chance that, if there were a malformation in a child and the mother took Primodos while pregnant, it was the fault of the drug",—[*Official Report*, 14 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 707.]

so Schering knew that. That was its legal advice decades ago. Page 7 of the memo from the Berlin archives, which this note came from, states that Mr Clothier told Schering that

> "there were 2 alternatives open to us—one is to establish a voluntary scheme of compensation in which a justifiable claim will be given compensation without proof of liability but simply accepting moral responsibility."

The company's review came to that conclusion. Decades later, why has it not happened?

The other alternative was to take the claims to court. What I found really interesting, and what I want to focus colleagues' attention on, is that according to the memo, the Schering representative, Dr Detering, said that he was

> "hesitant in establishing a scheme as the product is marketed world-wide. If we introduce this scheme in one country, we should introduce it in other countries."

This product was marketed in 81 countries. That is the issue here; that is why there has been a cover-up for decades. That is why the medical regulators have stood behind the pharmaceutical company in question, because they know this would cost the company a fortune. Its

[Ed Davey]

shareholders would have to cough up—possibly cough up billions. In my view, this is potentially one of the biggest cover-ups of a pharmaceutical outrage that the world has ever seen.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly powerful contribution. Does he agree that the recent drama documentary on Netflix, "Painkiller", highlights just how this kind of issue happens and keeps on happening, and that if we do not get to the heart of it—if we do not stop pharmaceutical companies flooding the markets unregulated and drugs getting to patients, including our constituents, and doing them damage—it is just going to continue?

Ed Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I did not see that particular programme, but I am sure she is right. The key thing is that we need to make sure that those large organisations are held to account. That is our job, and we have been failing, because we have not held them to account—we are still here, many years and many debates later. We have had a Prime Minister on our side, and these people still have not been held to account.

Sir Mike Penning: Actually, the records show that this issue did get to court in America, and the drug company did a deal—as happens in American courts—on a non-disclosure. Why would a drug company do that unless it was trying to cover up? It settled in the American courts, as I understand it, but on the basis that all the information was destroyed and would never be disclosed. Those are the sorts of things we are dealing with.

Ed Davey: The right hon. Gentleman is right to remind me and the House of that particular case. Interestingly, an American law firm was helping the campaign and was going to take the issue to court because of what had happened in America. For some reason, it pulled out.

Sir Mike Penning: What a surprise!

Ed Davey: Yes, what a surprise. All these examples add up to show that a lot of powerful people are trying to stop justice being done in this country and around the world, so I am so pleased to see cross-party support here today, in a very powerful way, to make sure that is put right.

Justice should come before the interests of the shareholders and justice should come before the professional reputations of the medical people on the regulatory bodies, and that is why the Minister should listen to the House today. Absolutely we should see the recommendations of the review come forward and absolutely there should be the compensation fund. She should get up at the Dispatch Box today and announce that. The offer that was made, I am told—I have not seen it in writing, but I am told an offer was made—was a £1 million total pot for all the families, which would have been a few thousand pounds per family. I hope the Minister does not suggest that that will be good enough. We need a proper compensation fund, and we will not stop fighting until that the Government provide for that. I hope she will respond to the answer from the right hon. Member for Maidenhead to my intervention about why Government solicitors are threatening the families and telling them they have to sign agreements that they will not continue any legal action, which goes exactly to the point that the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) made.

I want to see that action and I want the recommendations of the review to be implemented, but I want to put on the record that I am a bit suspicious. I think those involved are going to try to wriggle out of this in some way. They are going to make sure that no liability is mentioned, but they were liable. They knew it in the 1960s and they knew it in the 1970s: they are liable, and everyone who has been looking at this case knows it. I want the review to be implemented because the families need the money now. Individuals are dying, such as my constituent, and people are worried about their adult children and need their adult children to have the money now. I want the Government to go ahead and do that now. But I will tell the House what I really want: I want a public inquiry. I am fed up with these reviews. The review was great, but because this is such a scandal—a global pharmaceutical scandal—we want more. All this will come out only if the lawyers cannot threaten people and have non-disclosure agreements, so I want an inquiry in public—a public inquiry so that these people can be properly held to account once and for all.

1.52 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for bringing this debate to the House. Listening to all the powerful speeches really makes me proud of the Chamber. This is the Chamber at its best, with the powerful speeches of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey).

How distressing it must be for the women and families harmed by Primodos that they are still having to fight nearly five decades on. Their road to justice has been long and cruel, and it is shameful that we find it necessary to debate this again. How can it be that the Primodos families are still not being properly supported and compensated after all the evidence that has been presented?

Sadly, Primodos is not an isolated case, and we have seen many examples over the years of our regulatory bodies failing to keep patients safe from new medicines and medical devices. In 2013, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency listed 27 medicines that had been withdrawn on safety grounds. The average time they were on the market was 11 years. I wonder how many times we will allow history to repeat itself. There have been reports and reviews calling for reform, and back in 2004 the Health Committee undertook an inquiry into the influence of the pharmaceutical industry. It noted, of drug companies, the

"closeness that has developed between regulators and companies",

which had

"deprived the industry of rigorous quality control and audit."

It also highlighted

"the MHRA's poor history in recognising drug risks, poor communication and lack of public trust."

In 2020, Dame June Raine, the chief executive officer of the MHRA, stated that her agency had transformed itself from watchdog to enabler, so I ask: has anything improved in the intervening 20 years since the Health Committee inquiry? I fear not, and I think the time has

come for another inquiry of similar scope and depth, only with more robust outcomes. That is what we want—robust outcomes.

In 2020, the independent medicines and medical devices safety review, "First Do No Harm", found that Primodos, sodium valproate and pelvic mesh had all caused "avoidable harm". The review showed that patients had been let down, and it called for significant reforms of the MHRA, due to its mishandling of safety concerns. The review was clear that there is "gross under-reporting" of suspected adverse reactions and that

"systems are both too complex and too diffuse to allow early signal detection."

That theme keeps coming up, and in a recent meeting of the APPG on pandemic response and recovery we heard from Professor Carl Heneghan, who described widespread problems with the reporting of adverse drugs and device reactions, which continue to be a major cause of hospital admissions. As many as 98 out of 100 adverse drug reactions go unreported.

The APPG, of which I am a co-chair, was told that the MHRA is running a system that is too slow to act and is beset by conflicts. Failure to act now will only lead to more harm. We also heard from the solicitor Peter Todd who was acting for 43 individuals who suffered blood clots as a result of the AstraZeneca vaccination. He described how the Government's vaccine damage payment scheme is operating poorly and failing to help those who have been injured. Not only is the current system unable to protect patients from harm, but it is failing to look after those who have already been harmed.

Three years on from Baroness Cumberlege's landmark review, the Government have not fully implemented its recommendations. In particular, we are still waiting for redress schemes to be set up to meet the costs of additional care and support for those who were harmed by Primodos, sodium valproate and pelvic mesh. Why has that not been done?

This is a bleak and worrying situation, so I will try to end on a more positive note by commending the important work of the hon. Member for Bolton South East as chair of the APPG on hormone pregnancy tests. My final tribute must go to Marie Lyon, whose tireless campaigning on Primodos over the decades has been inspirational. She deserves the full support and respect of this House, and I hope she and others harmed by this drug can finally get justice.

1.57 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my near constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), and I join her and others in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her campaigns over the years, and of course to Marie Lyon for her many years of campaigning for justice for the families affected, including in my constituency.

When Baroness Cumberlege's report "First Do No Harm" was published in 2020, it finally offered those families hope of justice. It was unequivocal in finding that those affected by Primodos had "suffered avoidable harm" and should be entitled to support and financial redress. That should have been a landmark moment. The then Health Secretary apologised, appearing to take responsibility and accept the report's verdict, so it is really so disappointing that, as I stand here today, no Primodos-affected families have received any compensation payment to address what they have been through.

I want to emphasise the impact on individual lives by looking at two families in my constituency. Patricia McClellan had two children, giving birth to a daughter in 1969 and to her son, John, in 1971. She did not take any hormone pregnancy tests before giving birth to her daughter, who was born healthy, but she was prescribed Primodos when pregnant with John, who was born effectively missing an arm. When doctors came to assess him a couple of days after his birth, Patricia described being asked if she had taken any medication during her pregnancy, to which she replied that she had been given Primodos. She said:

"I will never forget the professor and the Doctors took themselves into my bathroom for a private conversation. I felt powerless as events happened around me."

She had a succession of other disempowering, worrying and disappointing experiences with medical professionals while caring for John of the type that were highlighted in Baroness Cumberlege's review.

She said:

"I have felt as though I have been kept in the dark for over 40 years. I just want answers and justice for my son and hopefully some closure to the trauma, guilt and stress that has affected almost my entire life."

Sadly, Patricia died in 2019, never having received the closure and justice that she needed.

John has lived his whole life with the impact of his disability, and struggles with red tape and constantly having to go through the processes to get recognition of his disability from the Department for Work and Pensions. He and his daughter Leah, Patricia's granddaughter, continue to fight for justice alongside other Primodos-affected families. Leah said to me:

"Being the daughter of a Primodos victim has also had its effects on me. I've lost trust in our health officials, I've witnessed the lies that have been told time and time again. Seeing my father deteriorate mentally and physically because of this is worrying for me."

In Leah's words, too many people affected by Primodos

"have sadly died since all this began. It truly feels like the Government is just waiting for them to pass on so this can be brushed under the carpet."

Peter Dowd: The mother of one of my constituents was given Primodos in August 1972, two years after the standing joint committee for propriety in medicine said that it should have been withdrawn. Warnings were there for years. Why did that happen? Does my hon. Friend agree that my constituent, and his mother and father, who are up in the Gallery today, require justice to be done, and to be seen to be done by way of redress?

Jeff Smith: I could not agree more, and families across the country have been affected in such a way.

The Pierce family are another family in my constituency whose whole lives have been shaped by Primodos. Edward and Janet Pierce's daughter, Louise, is now 54 years old. She was born with several different disabilities, which the families are convinced were caused by her mother having been prescribed Primodos. Louise has a severe mental disability, profound hearing loss, and difficulty walking. She has always required full-time care, which

[Jeff Smith]

has been provided by her parents for most of her life. She lived at home with Edward and Janet until she was 50. Edward said:

"We didn't realise the physical and mental effect this was having on our lives, it just creeps up on you."

In 2018, Janet had a serious stress-related breakdown, leaving her with short-term memory loss and lack of awareness, and Edward now acts as her full-time carer. Louise went into full-time residential accommodation at the time of Janet's illness. Edward said:

"I'm sure you can imagine the devastating effect this is still having on all our lives."

It is so disappointing that the Government rejected the report's recommendation for a new independent redress agency, and instead again highlighted the existing legal routes for redress. The Government apologised to people affected by the Primodos scandal, but are offering them no support. Those families lack the funding to be able properly to challenge the Government in court and get redress from existing legal routes, and they are being offered nothing else by the Government.

One of the specific recommendations in the Cumberlege review was the establishment of an ex gratia scheme for the victims of hormone pregnancy tests, and discretionary payments to provide redress for the stress, anxiety, psychological harm and toll of fighting for recognition experienced by those affected. That is what these families deserve.

Haven't these families suffered enough? The mothers who were given Primodos are in their 70s and 80s now, and some have sadly died. Their children are mostly in their 50s. Time is running out to give them the redress they deserve. The Cumberlege report stated that

"while there is disagreement between experts about whether Primodos caused birth defects, the fact remains that thousands of women and unborn children were exposed to a risk that was acknowledged at the time."

Primodos was deemed dangerous enough to pregnant women to be pulled off the shelves, and Baroness Cumberlege found that those families had suffered avoidable harm. In such circumstances, and having commissioned the report, surely it is the Government's moral duty to implement that report's recommendations in full or, failing that, to explain how those families will get the financial redress they deserve.

In July 2021, the then co-chairs of the all-party parliament group first do no harm responded to the Government's response, welcoming their acceptance of four of the review's nine recommendations, and a further one in principle. It also said:

"But we are deeply disappointed the Government has rejected calls for an independent redress agency or any redress for families whose lives have been devastated by medicines or medical devices. For those families justice has not been done today."

One of those co-chairs, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), is now Chancellor of the Exchequer. He has the purse strings and he could make those ex gratia payments happen.

We have heard today from the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). She knows this issue so well and her remarks were powerful. I completely agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) that the drug companies must be held responsible. Ultimately, they should be the ones who pay, but in the meantime it is time for the Government to stop hiding and avoiding their responsibilities. It is time to act, and time to give these families the justice they deserve.

2.5 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I was moved and saddened to read of the lifelong health difficulties experienced by one of my constituents, whose mother was given the Primodos hormone pregnancy test. It is a story of school, work and family life disrupted over a period of decades, with frequent hospital visits, multiple operations, organ transplants, and a lifetime requirement to take a powerful concoction of immunosuppressants and other medication. I was hugely impressed and inspired to hear of this brave individual's determination to succeed in life despite that adversity, and I believe it is time that he, and other Primodos victims, are finally given justice. I pay tribute to all the campaigners who have continued their fight for redress over all these years, despite so many setbacks.

The first warning of harm caused by hormone pregnancy tests came as early as 1958. Over the following period, many further problems were highlighted to the regulator of the time, the Committee on Safety of Medicines. As we have heard, the 1967 study by Dr Isabel Gal provided a clear warning of the serious damage being done by those tests, yet the sale of the product was not formally halted until 1978, 20 years after the first safety alerts, and 11 years after Dr Gal's ground-breaking study. Since then, research has repeatedly indicated that taking the test increased the risk of children being born with debilitating and life-shortening birth defects such as damaged limbs, brain damage and heart problems.

A major review was conducted at the University of Oxford in 2018, led by the distinguished scientist Professor Carl Heneghan, director of the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine. That study looked at 26 hormone pregnancy test studies involving over 76,000 women. The researchers concluded that taking drugs such as Primodos increased the risk of birth defects by 40%. They found "a clear association" between Primodos and several forms of malformation.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I am a biomedical scientist by background, and having read that review, what I find important is the way the researchers interrogated all the subsequent research that had been done, to ensure that there was no bias in any of the studies they included, and they excluded any studies that they felt were biased, using stringent statistical analysis. That makes the review all the more important to listen to.

Theresa Villiers: I agree with the hon. Lady. It was a rigorous study, and it is a concern that in 2019 MHRA experts rejected that report, arguing that the quality of the studies examined was poor and the methods used to analyse them were

"not in line with best practice."

As the hon. Lady pointed out, I do not think that is justified, and the Oxford team behind the research strongly refuted the claim made by the MHRA.

Despite all the scientific studies and research, campaigners have so far failed in their attempts to get compensation through the courts, and they have not been able to establish clear enough evidence of causation. That has

been a massive hurdle in many cases over the years, not least in relation to tobacco, where it took decades of legal battles finally to show beyond doubt the causative link between smoking and cancer.

One of the problems faced by the families campaigning for compensation in this case is that many of the scientific studies of the '70s and '80s just do not meet the standards we necessarily expect in the 2020s. Many times in this House the call has come from Back Benchers loud and clear to support the families, to listen to their stories and to secure a fair outcome at last. The pressure that has come from this Chamber in so many debates helped to secure the welcome decision by the then Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) to include Primodos in the independent medicines and medical devices safety review, led by Baroness Cumberlege.

Baroness Cumberlege concluded that Primodos was responsible for avoidable harm, that it continued to be used for years longer than it should have been, and that a fund should be set up to support families with the cost of care. She was very clear that, in the face of growing concerns, it should have been withdrawn from 1967. Her report acknowledges the disagreement between experts on whether Primodos caused birth defects, but she stated

"the fact remains that thousands of women and unborn children were exposed to a risk that was acknowledged at the time. That should not have happened. This is not a case of us judging the actions of the past by the standards of today. This was discussed at the time, but not acted upon. The system failed."

Those conclusions from Baroness Cumberlege are truly damning. We have a Government-sponsored independent review concluding that the system failed the victims and survivors of the Primodos tragedy. We must find a way to put that right and ensure that the families get the recognition and financial redress they deserve. I urge Ministers to listen to the House today and take action at last. We cannot let this injustice continue.

2.11 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): There is considerable evidence indicating that those women who took the drug Primodos—prescribed by their general practitioner—and who were pregnant at that time gave birth to babies with serious birth defects, including deformities and disabilities, missing limbs, cleft palates, brain damage and damage to internal organs. In some cases, those women miscarried or had stillbirths.

Sir Mike Penning: This is a really important point: Primodos was not prescribed; no prescription was written. No pharmacist could look at the patient and say, "Is this the right drug for that person?" It was a drawer opened, tablets taken out and pushed across. I know it is not intentional, but the word "prescription" is slightly misleading.

Allan Dorans: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention; he is absolutely correct. The surviving victims are now mainly in their 40s and 50s. Many face a host of new medical problems and their bodies continue to suffer. Many have died prematurely.

Peter Dowd: The Public Authorities (Accountability) Bill—the Hillsborough law—would require public authorities to admit responsibility following adverse and mass casualty incidents. 97 people died as a result of Hillsborough, and a scandalous cover-up went on for decades. Would the hon. Gentleman agree with me, my constituents in the Gallery and other constituents in the Gallery, that it is time to end the cover-up and to establish how many people have died prematurely as a result of Primodos?

Allan Dorans: I would welcome that type of inquiry and the opportunity to view the outcome.

Despite serious concerns being expressed by the eminent paediatrician, Dr Isabel Gal, in 1967 indicating the possible dangers of Primodos, no official warnings were issued about these drugs until eight years later. There is strong and compelling evidence of systematic regulatory failures, demonstrating that the committees tasked with safeguarding the health of pregnant women failed in their duty of care.

When I was elected in 2019, I had never heard of the drug Primodos, and I suspect that is the case for many Members. I had heard of thalidomide, as it received far greater coverage in the media at the time. However, since then I have learned much about the horrors caused by Primodos—the devastating effect it had on unborn babies and on the babies born with horrendous birth defects, and the continuing, unimaginable tragic consequences for the mothers and families whose lives have been so cruelly affected by the drug. It is an absolute disgrace and shameful that those families have not only been utterly abandoned and ignored by the drugs companies responsible, but also by successive Governments, who actively put up barriers to avoid accepting the consequences of the manufacture, approval, prescribing and giving out of Primodos.

The drugs companies involved in the production of Primodos, the medical authorities at the time who failed to protect people and successive Governments are all liable for the suffering caused to the victims of Primodos. They are all culpable and guilty of negligence, for failing to put right this horrendous wrong put upon innocent people. It cannot be right that the fight for justice in these circumstances has been left in the hands of a few determined individuals battling against a huge global pharmaceutical conglomerate with millions of pounds of resources and our own Government.

I highlight the case of my constituent, Nan. I have her permission to share her experience and the effect that Primodos had on her and her daughter, Michelle. In January 1975, Nan was a recently married, healthy young woman. Feeling sick and suspecting she may be pregnant, she went to her GP for a pregnancy test, expecting—as was normal at that time—a urine test. Instead, her doctor gave her two Primodos tablets. By 1975, Primodos had already been banned for use as a pregnancy test for five years in Norway and Sweden. Nan put her utmost trust in the knowledge, experience and expertise of her GP. It was subsequently confirmed that she was about seven or eight weeks pregnant. She had a very uneventful pregnancy during which she neither smoked nor drank alcohol.

On 28 August 1975, Nan's daughter, Michelle, was born. It was immediately discovered that Michelle was born with a hole in her diaphragm, which had allowed her bowel and spleen and part of her liver and kidney to be forced in to her chest cavity, crushing her lung. She was not expected to live, but through the exceptional skills of our national health service she survived and is

[Allan Dorans]

now 48 years of age. Throughout her life, she has endured numerous operations and surgeries and long periods of hospitalisation. She has suffered severe health issues, including breathing difficulties, a weakened immune system, numerous bowel obstructions and inflammatory bowel infections, and she has been unable to conceive children. The horrendous effects of the debilitating physical, psychological and medical conditions and the extremely challenging health conditions suffered by Michelle and her parents for the past 48 years just cannot be adequately described by me with words.

When Michelle was born in 1975, Nan was unaware that the drug that she had been given to test for pregnancy had been associated with birth defects for the previous eight years. It was not until some two and a half years later that she read an article in the press that reported on a number of cases linking birth defects to Primodos, including internal organ damage similar to that suffered by Michelle. Since that time, Nan, along with many other women, has been fighting the injustice, where no one has ever been held responsible for the damage caused to so many lives through prescribing Primodos, which had been approved by the Government.

In February 2018, the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), announced that Baroness Cumberlege would oversee an independent medicines and medical devices safety review. This review was, among other things, instructed to consider the consequences of Primodos. One of the conclusions in the report by Baroness Cumberlege is that Primodos should have been withdrawn from the market in 1967, after the first report by Dr Gal. However, the Government refused to accept responsibility for the effects of Primodos without a proven causal association, but admitted later, in a Sky TV interview, that there was a possible association. There was a moral duty for Government representatives on the Committee on Safety of Medicines to protect patients, but they failed in their duty of care by suppressing the evidence of harm caused by the drug. Even today, the Government continue to deny that they suppressed evidence, while supporting the flawed conclusions of the 2017 expert working group.

The damage to individuals, lives and families caused by Primodos, successive Governments' lack of action and the failure to prevent, is immeasurable. This could be a far greater tragedy than thalidomide. Apart from frustration at the pharmaceutical companies and the glacial pace of Government in righting this tragic, historical wrong, the most chilling words we hear, increasingly regularly, are: "We have recently lost another of our Primodos family." The tragedy is that we all know that those people died without receiving the justice they deserved. Even if compensation were paid, it would never fully compensate the families who were so tragically affected, or take away the immense guilt experienced by mothers who feel that they were in some way to blame for the defects that their children suffered.

It is well past the time for the current Government to put right this historical wrong, end the scandal and give some security to those who have suffered so much, thus allowing the mothers, fathers and the children who have survived some dignity and compensation for the tragedy that was caused through no fault of their own. The very least the Government can do is accept responsibility for the tragic circumstances, immediately issue a full apology to everyone affected by Primodos and compensate the victims. I and my party urge the Government to accept and commit to implementing the full recommendations of the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety review and to set up a redress fund for families affected by Primodos.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): When we get to the winding-up speeches, it will be six minutes, eight minutes, eight minutes and then we will leave two minutes for the proposer of the motion.

2.21 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this important debate and for her outstanding and ongoing work on the issue.

I am here today on behalf of my constituent Helen Barham, who since her birth has suffered from the brain disorder agenesis of the corpus callosum, hydrocephalus, damage to her skeletal system, and a brain haemorrhage at only 12 weeks, leading to epilepsy. She wears callipers and boots due to her feet deformities. She has had to have a number of major surgeries throughout her lifetime, including spinal surgery and a total hysterectomy. Despite all that, she still awaits compensation, which would allow her a personal carer and more comfort than she currently lives in.

Following Helen's brain haemorrhage at 12 weeks in 1975, her mother Diane was told, in Diane's words, that Helen would be spastic, mentally retarded, partially sighted and that, if the doctor was her, they would go home and forget about Helen, as she would be nothing but a cabbage. Diane and Helen have defied that awful prognosis. Helen has an active social life, with swimming, discos and holidays to Butlins.

Over the last almost 50 years, Diane has tirelessly kept fighting for Helen to have the best quality of life possible. However, ultimately the opportunity for a normal and healthy life was taken from Helen while she was still in the womb, because in 1974, Diane was given two pills following a missed period. It was only when Helen was three years old that a doctor from Great Ormond Street Hospital informed Diane that it was likely that those two Primodos pills were the cause of Helen's disabilities.

Although Diane has dedicated much of her life to Helen's care, as she has said, it has often come at a cost to her other children, her marriage, and her relationship with her parents. She is getting older and less able to look after Helen. All Diane asks is for Helen to receive compensation so that she can have someone to care for her all the time. Helen is currently in hospital after experiencing yet another complication following recent surgery to remove her gall bladder. Doctors were unable to remove Helen's gall bladder fully and she is still struggling on the ward.

I welcome the Government's apology to families by the former Health Secretary on behalf of the healthcare system, but it is financial assistance that families like Diane and Helen's need. As has already been said, the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety review led by Baroness Cumberlege found that the drug should have been removed from the market in 1967, and that both the state and the manufacturer had an ethical

responsibility to fund a financial scheme for those harmed to help them with their care costs. Having been born in 1974, Helen certainly falls into that camp.

The Government are already working towards redress systems for valproate and vaginal mesh, as advised by the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety review, but there has been no progress on a scheme for Primodos families. The 2018 systematic review of historical human studies by Professor Carl Heneghan clearly demonstrated that Primodos had a clear association with different forms of malformations, including musculo-skeletal, neurological and neurogenetical forms, all of which have affected Helen.

Modern science is also paving the way. Previously it was impossible to prove a direct link with human studies, as that would require testing the drug on pregnant women, but Professor Neil Vargesson has found similar outcomes to those for children born following their mothers being prescribed Primodos when testing the drug on zebrafish, chosen for their genetic similarity to humans. A new study has used chicken embryos and human cell lines, and even low doses produce developmental abnormalities. The full results are due later this year. Baroness Cumberlege felt that there was enough evidence of a link between Primodos and complications from birth for financial support in February 2018. Since then, the evidence has only grown.

I would like to reiterate to the Minister today how much difference the financial redress recommended by the IMMDS would make to Helen and Diane's quality of life. Diane trusted her NHS doctor and our medical system, and now we need to support her and her family as they continue to face Helen's complications together.

2.26 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this debate, and thank her for her outstanding work in leading this campaign in Parliament. I also pay tribute to all the families of children who were born with birth defects after their pregnant mothers took Primodos for the courage that they have shown. In particular, I pay tribute to Marie Lyon—who, I am pleased to see, is here with us today—for her tireless work.

Those affected should not have to fight for justice. I join colleagues in the debate in calling on the Government to acknowledge the fact that the recommendations in the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety review relating to Primodos-affected families have not been implemented, and to explain why; to implement those recommendations and to set up a redress fund for families affected by Primodos; and to withdraw the 2017 expert working group report on hormone pregnancy tests, which has been disputed by academics and is inconsistent with other more independent studies.

In their fight for justice, the families have suffered setback after setback. The latest came a few months ago when claims for damages against Bayer Pharma, Schering Health Care Ltd, Aventis Pharma Ltd and the Government were struck out in the High Court, partly owing to lack of funding for legal representation. That was a bitterly disappointing blow.

The Government have a moral duty to set up the redress fund for those affected. As far back as the late 1950s, concerns were raised that hormone pregnancy tests, the most commonly used of which was Primodos, could cause abnormalities in a developing baby. Further studies in the UK and elsewhere from the late 1960s to the early 1970s suggested a link between the use of hormone pregnancy tests and a wide range of serious birth defects.

It took until 1975 for the Committee on Safety of Medicines to recommend that hormone pregnancy tests should no longer be used. The committee said that there was "little justification" for them, as alternatives were available. It then sent an alert letter to all doctors in the UK, advising them of a possible association between hormone pregnancy tests and an increased incidence of congenital abnormalities. The letter recommended that doctors "should not normally prescribe" those products as pregnancy tests.

However, it has been reported that Primodos sometimes continued to be used as a pregnancy test within the NHS until it was withdrawn from the market by the manufacturer, Schering Chemicals Ltd, in 1978. By that stage, the damage had been done. Legal proceedings by the affected families began, but were discontinued in the early 1980s. It was not until early 2014, and the discovery of documents from the 1960s that reportedly showed that studies suggested that hormone pregnancy tests caused miscarriages and congenital abnormalities, that a new campaign called for an independent public inquiry into them.

Criticisms of the 2017 independent expert working group report on hormone pregnancy tests included the fact that it did not examine regulatory issues and that a number of documents had not been included in the review. Additionally, the methodology and findings in the report have been disputed by academics and are inconsistent with other academic reviews, as today's motion highlights. One of those reviews was by a group of researchers at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Carl Heneghan. The researchers concluded:

"The evidence of an association"—

by which they mean between hormone pregnancy tests and birth defects— "has previously been deemed weak, and previous litigation and reviews have been inconclusive. However, we believe that this systematic review shows an association of oral HPTs with congenital malformations."

Despite that, the Government say that they currently have no plans to reassess the findings of the expert working group review. I hope that, today, we hear a different response from the Minister.

In 2018, the independent medicines and medical devices safety review was announced by the Government, led by Baroness Cumberlege. Despite the Cumberlege review's finding that Primodos caused avoidable harm, and the clear recommendation for redress for those affected, the Government have refused to even acknowledge it. That is a grave injustice and an insult to those who have suffered. Let us remind ourselves of some of the adverse impacts that affected individuals and families have attributed to hormone pregnancy test use: congenital heart defects, dysmorphic facial features such as cleft palate and lip, digestive system and bowel issues, intellectual disability, limb defects and, tragically, death.

Sir Mike Penning: Could I add to that those who were told to have an abortion, and those who had a miscarriage or a stillbirth? Their families have been damaged almost as much, and the guilt is still with them.

Margaret Greenwood: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point and I agree. The Minister must recognise the clear moral case to support those affected. Back in 2017, the then Health Secretary apologised

"on behalf of the NHS and the whole healthcare system...to those who've suffered and their families, for their frustration, for the time it's taken to get their voices heard."

However, in the years since, the Government have failed to provide the recognition and redress that those affected by Primodos deserve. The Government must fully implement the recommendations in the independent medicines and medical devices safety review and set up a redress fund for those affected by Primodos as a matter of urgency. Those affected by Primodos have suffered enough, and they deserve justice.

2.31 pm

Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I join others in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has done such terrific work campaigning on this issue? She commandeered me as we were neighbours on Upper Committee Corridor South, when I was relatively new in Parliament. Those campaigning efforts have been so important on a fundamental issue for so many of our constituents. One of my own constituents is here today, following our proceedings closely.

The case before us seems so remarkably straightforward that it is impossible to see why there is such a stick-in-the-mud attitude from the Government, though perhaps less so from the pharmaceutical companies, because they know that they are culpable and, ultimately, deserve a financial liability. Why can I be so confident of that link? There seems to be one very striking fact, which was revealed by Jason Farrell in the important work he did for Sky News: the drug was used in South Korea and Germany as an abortifacient. It was used to procure abortions. What is a drug that will do that doing to a baby? It is causing harm. That is so straightforward. We have heard already that Primodos contained 40 times the amount of hormone in a contraceptive pill. It also contained 13 times the amount of the morning-after pill. It is so clear and self-evident that harm has been caused, and therefore responsibility must be laid at someone's door. We know from today's debate where those doors are.

I have great sympathy for the Minister who is to respond, because there is an extraordinary, peculiar tendency of Government—one I do not understand as a Back Bencher and did not understand in government—to cover up the mistakes of long-since-passed Administrations. We have seen it with Hillsborough, the infected blood scandal and even with thalidomide. There is no doubt an almost endless list. I do not understand it—it is not the current Administration at fault. They have done nothing wrong; some were not even born—the Prime Minister was not—when the scandal started. Yet again and again, Governments and the bureaucracy will not open up, allow the real truth to come out and follow the evidence that was so brilliantly and clearly put by Baroness Cumberlege in her report.

2.35 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on raising this issue, and I thank her for bringing this important debate to the Chamber and enabling us all to participate and add our contributions. I have spoken on this issue in the Chamber before, as have others, but today is important. The right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) said succinctly in his introduction that for the life of him he could not understand why the Government have not accepted the key issue. To him, it is an open and shut case; it is to me, too. The Government really should grasp that and come back with the answer that we all seek.

I want to speak up for all those mothers and families impacted across Northern Ireland. As the only Northern Ireland MP here in the debate, I wanted to contribute and assure those families across Northern Ireland that I am here to represent them and be their voice. The issues regarding Primodos have been ongoing for many years. We still have families fighting daily for justice, or simply for an explanation of what went wrong. The independent medicines and medical devices safety review has stated its view that from 1967, hormone pregnancy tests should no longer have been available. However, the facts show, as right hon. and hon. Members have illustrated on behalf of the families, that it was still used until 1978. I stand with right hon. and hon. Members to speak up for those who have no justice, no answers and no compensation to this day. Like the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), I wish to see compensation that reflects the loss and impact on those mothers and children and all the families.

Varying combinations of pills are used to this day by millions of women for contraception. Primodos tablets were 40 times the strength of the pill. My goodness, if we grasp that, it leads us straightaway to what happened, but nobody knew it. Campaigners have claimed that the use of the medicine in early pregnancy caused a range of devastating and lifelong impacts such as limb defects, spina bifida, congenital heart defects and developmental and learning problems, to name just a few. Furthermore, it has been claimed that the use of the drug led to miscarriage or stillbirths. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) made that clear in his intervention, for which I thank him as it was a good reminder of the impacts.

I am pleased that it has now been decided that an apology is due. Words are great, and it is good to have the apology on the record, but as elected representatives we want support and compensation for the families who have suffered avoidable harm. I am not convinced that an apology goes far enough. I speak for those who have suffered miscarriages and stillbirths, and I have raised this issue before. In so many cases, we are unable to carry out genetic testing due to babies dying and their remains being gone, as the right hon. Gentleman rightly said in his intervention. I have no doubt that so many families out there are still traumatised by the prospect that their baby did not survive because of this drug. There must be support for those parents too. I look to the Minister to consider them for any form of compensation or support that may be forthcoming. There is sufficient evidence to prove that the drug was harmful for a period of time. We had a duty of care then and we have one now to those families. The Government must not fail again.

To conclude, I believe there is scope to do more, both now and in the future, to support the families who have been suffering these traumas for decades and to ensure

that such mistakes are not made in the future and lessons are learned to protect life. Let us do something for all those families who this day want help which, at the moment, does not seem to be forthcoming. That is why I look to the Minister, who is very understanding. She understands the issue very well. She has the heart for it. On behalf of my constituents and others, I hope that today we get the answers and the full compensation we want for them.

2.40 pm

James Grundy (Leigh) (Con): First, I pay tribute to my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has been so diligent over so many years in bringing this issue to the fore. Secondly, I pay tribute to local campaigner Marie Lyon, who lives in my borough and who has done so much to raise the issue of the Primodos scandal over a considerable period of time.

The Primodos pregnancy test was—I understand there has been some dispute about this description—prescribed to Marie over 50 years ago. She spoke about this very eloquently on Sky during its investigation. It was prescribed to her over 50 years ago. As other Members have said, the concentration of female hormones in the pill—she was told to take two pills, 12 hours apart—was the equivalent of taking 80 modern oral contraceptive pills in a single day, or, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) mentioned, the equivalent of 26 morning-after pills during a single day. The facts are beyond doubt. Is there anyone in this Chamber or on this earth who believes that that would not cause significant damage to unborn children?

This issue has festered for too long. I understand, from speaking to my hon. Friend the Minister on the many occasions I have buttonholed her to ask her about what progress we can make, that the cases in the court have delayed progress. I take her word on that, but as others have said, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), I believe that this issue has progressed out of the court and it is now long beyond time that we put it to a permanent resolution. I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister speaks from the Dispatch Box she can give the House the reassurance that that will indeed be the case, and that we move forward to a scheme of redress and compensation, and get justice for the families affected. I hope that as an early part of that process, she will make haste to contact Marie and other members of the families affected, and meet them to discuss how we can move the issue forward.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset said, for many years Governments of all colours have failed to address these issues and have perhaps put a carpet over the sins of the fathers, as it were. It is long past time that this was dealt with. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. Justice delayed any further is certainly justice denied.

2.43 pm

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): I start by thanking the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for all her work in raising the issue of Primodos, and Marie Lyon. Like the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), I knew nothing of Primodos when I was first elected in 2019. Shortly after my election, I met Marie with Charlotte Fensome, who joins us today in the Gallery. Charlotte's brother Steven was a victim of Primodos and Charlotte's family have been one of the affected families. Many of the words I am going to use today are Charlotte's words, speaking of what her family has endured because of the advice of a GP to take Primodos. Not long after our meeting in Parliament, I met the Bagley family. Ted Bagley, Steven's father, is here in the Gallery today and I welcome him to Parliament. This debate is long overdue. It is extremely important that, now legal proceedings are not ongoing, we can discuss what the Government can do for Primodos families.

The afternoon I spent in Wolverhampton North East with Ted and Pat Bagley, Charlotte, and Steven Bagley was a really enjoyable afternoon. I greatly valued the chance of meeting Steven and the Bagley family. It was a home filled with love. I have absolutely no doubt that Steven was aware that he was cherished and loved by his family every day of his life, but I left that home in absolute awe of the efforts to care for Steven made by the two parents in their 80s who were still entirely responsible for him. Let me read Charlotte's summary of her family life:

> "Mum was given Primodos by her GP in Wolverhampton in the early weeks of her pregnancy with my brother Steven…he was born in 1967 with severe brain damage. In many ways he had a difficult life. He had profound learning disabilities and was unable to speak, feed or wash himself. He was incontinent and wheelchair bound. He suffered violent seizures on a daily basis, due to a form of epilepsy that medicine was unable to control and that kept him awake at night. He needed twenty four hour care and my incredible parents cared for him with great difficulty, but with absolute devotion, at home full-time, from the day he was born until the day he died aged 53 years.
>
> We are a close family and we all adored Steven. I know that despite his disabilities, he was happy in life and he felt loved. Seizures aside, he was always smiling and he had the most beautiful, expressive eyes that could tell you exactly how he was feeling. I'm sure that he understood far more than any professional gave him credit. He was a gentle man with a big personality and a devilish sense of humour, who loved being the centre of attention and enjoyed socialising. And although he may not have been able to talk, he was full of fun and made plenty of loud noises to compensate!
>
> My parents were determined to give him a 'normal life' from day one, even though society was less accepting of disability…Steven went wherever we went as a family…on the dance floor…at parties…in restaurants…he travelled through Europe by car, flew on aeroplanes and sailed on ships. He loved listening to opera for hours with dad and was very partial to a McDonalds! He appreciated…life and did more in life than many people without his disadvantages.
>
> The hardship has made my parents stronger despite the odds and this year they celebrated 62 years of marriage. To their credit, my own childhood was full of love, enjoyment and opportunity despite their difficult life. My sister Nikki and I were always incredibly proud to have Steven as our brother".

I am in no doubt of that love for Steven, but the daily grind of looking after someone with such profound disabilities was awful to witness. Charlotte told me during my visit that because Steven's epilepsy kept him awake at night, his parents had a round-the-clock watch. His mum Pat, in her 80s, sat up overnight with Steven, only sleeping when Steven's father woke up in the early morning to take over the watch. The Cumberlege report gave Steven's family some hope that finally help was on the way to support them in caring for Steven. That redress is what I want to speak about today.

[Jane Stevenson]

Baroness Cumberlege says in her report that hormone pregnancy tests

"are not just a historic issue. We do not doubt the continuing psychological suffering caused by their use - indeed we have witnessed it on the faces and in the words of the families we have met; the sorrow and anger arising from a conviction that lives had been needlessly, and often irreparably, damaged, both physically and mentally; the impact of carrying a relentless sense of burning injustice for decades without resolution; parents of the affected children, deeply anxious about what will happen to their adult child when they are no longer there for them; mothers burdened by guilt at having taken the tablets. The extent of the suffering, endured over decades, must not be underestimated."

The report calls for help for families to access support, and also for redress. Both are greatly needed, and I hope that the Government will respond positively to this debate. We have heard Members on both sides of the House speak of the impact that Primodos has had on families, and I am especially pleased that several have mentioned that no mother should feel any guilt about having taken it. It is crucial for every mother to know that she—like all of us when we see a GP—took the advice of medical professionals, whom we trust to know better than us and to be acting in our interests.

That redress would not cost a great deal in the overall scheme of Government spending. The Primodos families remaining are now in the low hundreds, not the many thousands. A discretionary award based on need would really help those families. When I asked Charlotte Fensome what the compensation and redress money would have allowed, she came back with several very manageable asks. The first was night sits to relieve her parents, who were in their 80s, of having to sit all night with Steven. The second was a choice of incontinence pads which were not available on the NHS. The third was continuity of domiciliary carers who could get to know Steven and understand his needs. The fourth was more suitable wheelchairs. The fifth was adult centre training to provide ways of occupying Steven, and the sixth was future care. That is the worry that families have. Primodos parents are getting older and older, and many of them worry about leaving behind a child who will be at the mercy of the state; we must give them reassurance. Finally, there was the difficulty in accessing help. The Government could accept that Cumberlege recommendation to give the families a contact point to help them to access the services that they so desperately need.

We have heard from many Members about the drugs fight in the courts, so I will not go over that ground. It was always a David-Goliath fight for the Primodos families, and I know that they feel exhausted. They have waited so long for redress; they have waited so long for help.

Steven sadly died on Boxing Day in 2020. He had been taken into hospital, having contracted covid from a visiting carer. His sister Charlotte, with typical determination, fought her way into the intensive care unit to be with her brother. It is too late for the Bagley family, but their greatest wish is for other families to have the support that they so severely and desperately needed.

2.52 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing the debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the incredibly moving and powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson). I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) for her very powerful speech, and for the vital work that she has done in this area. Finally, I pay tribute to the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests and Baroness Cumberlege for all that they have been doing to support the hundreds of women and children whose lives have been turned upside down by the use of Primodos from the late 1950s until the 1970s.

This is an extremely important issue for my constituents Sheila and Stuart Harvey, and Sheila's son Raymond Hyman. I am delighted that they have been able to join us, and are watching and listening to this important debate from the Public Gallery. Sheila was given a Primodos pregnancy test in the late 1960s, completely unaware of the risks. Her son Raymond was born apparently healthy and happy, but Sheila soon became worried when he failed to put on weight. Three months into his life, and after numerous visits to different doctors and hospitals, a team of surgeons at Great Ormond Street Hospital discovered that his heart had failed to develop properly in the womb. Only one ventricle had formed, and the main arteries to his heart were the wrong way round. Raymond underwent six surgical procedures during his childhood, and there were many points at which his parents were worried that he would not survive.

Fortunately, Raymond has survived, but there has of course been an impact on his whole life. His growth and education were affected, and he continues to struggle with his mental health, as well as having to take a huge number of pills every day. I understand that he receives no financial assistance whatsoever, not even to help pay for the prescriptions that he needs to deal with the effects of the drug.

As many Members have said, families and victims such as Raymond deserve justice. The women who used Primodos did nothing wrong. The NHS failed them, and we should not turn our back on them now. The Government have apologised to the families for what they have been through, and I very much welcome that apology, but I understand that the Government have no plans at the moment to offer financial redress to the victims. The principle of providing redress is nothing new and has been applied before in this country. It happened in the case of thalidomide, for which the Department paid around £80 million over 10 years. It happened again with variant CJD, for which the Government allocated a fund of more than £67 million for the victims.

Just like thalidomide victims and those diagnosed with variant CJD, the victims of Primodos need and deserve our support, and not just in financial terms but with practical and non-financial help, too. The Government have so far refused to help, saying their focus is on preventing future harm. It should not be a choice between reducing the risk of future harm, on the one hand, and helping those who have already suffered, on the other. This is not an either/or but an and. We should be doing both.

I know that those watching our proceedings, both from the Gallery and at home, will very much hope for some assurance from the Minister today that a scheme to address this terrible injustice will finally be established. It is trite and has already been said, but the words of William Gladstone are so appropriate today: justice delayed is justice denied.

2.56 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It has been an honour and a privilege to sit through this debate. As usual, I will be speaking with no notes, because a lot of what has been said today I would have said myself. I pay tribute to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). We have done much work together over the years.

I pay tribute to Marie Lyon and all the other campaigners, but there is something about this debate. Every time we have it there is unity, conformity, passion and love in the Chamber but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) said, it disappears into Government and does not come back out. Governments of all descriptions have known about this for years and could have done something about it, but, for some unknown reason, they did not. When I was a Home Office Minister under my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) we did other inquiries together, but we had to battle to get them.

I do not understand why Governments, of all descriptions, do not come to the House to make statements, so we have to UQ them. It is plainly obvious that we will get a statement. We had three statements today, and quite rightly, but the Government would have been UQ-ed if they had not come to the House. Perhaps common sense is prevailing.

When it comes to really serious issues, like Primodos, for some unknown reason the Government, the Department and the Treasury pull down the shutters. It is not one Department, and I fear for the Minister when she stands at the Dispatch Box, because this is way outside the remit of just the Department of Health and Social Care.

We heard earlier that Government lawyers are threatening activists who are trying to get justice for their families, loved ones and others. Many of these campaigners have lost their loved ones, and some of them were victims themselves when they were told to have an abortion or when they had a miscarriage or stillbirth. A lot has changed in society but, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a really difficult thing for a woman to go to her GP because she thought she was pregnant, especially if she might be a single mum. These couples and single mums were passionately waiting for this pregnancy to make their life fulfilled, and then, a short time later, they were told that perhaps the best thing to do was to abort the child because they would have terrible deformities, or they might go through childbirth. I am lucky enough to have just become a grandfather. I remember being there 33 years ago when my wife punched me on the nose halfway through childbirth. She did not intend to do it; she had no idea what was happening. She was just in a lot of pain and doing that made her feel better. These women were there and then all of a sudden they realised that the disfigurements and abnormalities were there to be seen—or, as we have heard in this debate, not seen until a little later.

We will be having a debate later, which I will be leading, about a situation where babies are born exactly like that and people are being told, "Oh, they've got bunions." They do not have bunions; they have a genetic deformity. But because that deformity is so rare, no one understands it. On this issue, however, the Government, the NHS, the GPs and the drug company knew what they were doing. If the drug company had withdrawn Primodos after a year, when it first started to see this, most of us would have understood that these sorts of situations occur and it should, rightly, have compensated. However, that is not what happened. This went on year after year, with it knowing about this drug.

My point about the word "prescribed" is not just semantics; this drug was not prescribed. A prescription is a prescription. Opening a drawer and giving out a couple of tablets to the lady in front of you is not a prescription; it is a handout. This was done with no information given as to the dangers that we all see today. We have only to buy a packet of paracetamol to see written across the back of it what could happen. These ladies were not given that opportunity. They needed to know whether or not they were pregnant, for whatever situation they were personally in, and the GP then opened the drawer. This was in an NHS surgery, with a GP who was self-employed, as they mostly are, but paid for by the NHS. Those drugs were given not through a pharmacist, but directly from the drug company to the GP to hand out.

Let me conclude on an area that we have not really touched on, and it is something that Governments need to understand. I was a shadow health Minister for four years and I was passionate about this. The damage to our NHS of public understanding of this is so, so bad. The public need to trust the NHS. When they go to their GP, they need to be able to trust that if something needs to be done, it will be done for them and not for the system. Our NHS is being damaged by the way this cover-up continues. Government lawyers have accepted bits of Baroness Cumberlege's report, but the fundamentals of it, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead made sure happened, have been completely ignored. We can run around the head of a pin and say, "It is because there was legal action here and legal action there," but we should say, "Let's just do what is right. We have made a mistake, in the Department or in the drug company, and we are going to put it right and put it right today, for those families who are still there and for those families we have lost." That is the decent thing that this House should do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We come to the wind-ups. I call Hannah Bardell.

3.3 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a massive privilege to speak on behalf of my constituent Wilma Ord and those other victims. I declare an interest, as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hormone pregnancy tests, where I work alongside an incredible campaigner, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). She has done the most wonderful job and we have stood side by side.

One of the first cases I ever dealt with as a constituency Member began back in 2015, when Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen came to my constituency surgery. As happened to so many of the victims—our constituents who have been mentioned today—Wilma's doctor had taken out a pill from his top drawer when she was pregnant and handed it over to her, and she had trusted him. Ultimately, that is what this debate is about. It is about that social contract that our constituents have

[Hannah Bardell]

with us as parliamentarians and with Government, with their doctors and the institutions of the NHS, and with those private companies that are allowed into that space by us and by Government. It is also about the lack of regulation. If the Government continue to refuse to do anything about that, we can only conclude that these have been acts of state-sanctioned harm, because those companies were allowed to operate within the framework of our society and harm was done to our constituents.

Another issue, which has not been touched on an awful lot, is the flawed and failed legal process. I will touch on that, but first I pay tribute to Marie Lyon, who is a remarkable campaigner; to Jason Farrell of Sky News, who has done an incredible job and produced the documentary, "Primodos: The Secret Drug Scandal", which I encourage Members to watch; to Baroness Cumberlege, for her remarkable work; and of course to the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). In my opinion, her campaign on this subject is one of the right hon. Lady's greatest achievements of her time in office. There may be many things on which we disagree, but we will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder on the issue. The Minister should be aware that we are not going anywhere. Whatever happens at the next election, parliamentarians from every party in this place will continue to hold the Government to account on the issue. The scientists Carl Heneghan and Neil Vargesson have been mentioned numerous times; their work has also been crucial.

In 2020 the right hon. Member for Maidenhead was right when she said:

> "I almost felt it was sort of women being patted on the head and being told 'there, there, dear. Don't worry. You're imagining it. You don't know. We know better than you do.'"

I agree wholeheartedly with her, as that is exactly how my constituent was made to feel—she was gaslighted. I have sat with my constituent many times and I sat with her again recently. She lost her husband, George, a year ago. He died not knowing the truth and not seeing justice. It feels very much as if this Government are waiting for people to die rather than taking action, and that is for shame. When I met with Wilma recently we talked a little bit about what the future holds. As other hon. Members have said, our constituents are scared about what will happen next and about what the process and the future will hold.

I want to talk a little about that process. When some of our constituents took their legal action to court, the litigation was cumbersome and expensive and, after the judicial decision this year, the campaigners felt that they had really been done over. I will use my parliamentary privilege, Mr Deputy Speaker, to say that they were done over by a company called Pogust Goodhead, which approached the Primodos campaigners to take over the case. It then got cold feet and decided to drop the claimants and the victims when it did not fancy its chances of winning. To compound that, the company went on to withhold the documents that constituents such as Wilma Ord had presented to the company to pursue the case. That prevented the campaign from being able to find other legal representation and fundamentally meant that the campaign was unsuccessful in court. In my view, that is a hostile and odious movement by any legal firm.

The court citation states:

> "Shortly after the service of the defendants' evidence, PGMBM"—

Pogust Goodhead—

> "informed the claimants that they could no longer act for them. They then applied to come off the record… The material placed…in support of the solicitors' application to come off the record is privileged and has been withheld from me and from the defendants."

Those are the words of Mrs Justice Yip. She goes on to say that

> "some claimants discontinued their claims",

and talks about the issues around managing a case that has "so many unrepresented litigants".

In its mission statement, Pogust Goodhead says it is a

> "global partnership…working to help individuals, groups, and businesses access fair and tangible justice."

What a load of absolute nonsense. I appeal to the company directly today, as I am pretty sure the lawyers who worked on the case will be watching: give our constituents their documents back and come clean on exactly how you pulled out of that litigation. And for shame on the Government for going into cahoots with that crowd and leaving our constituents and those victims in that situation. That is state-sponsored and funded action against our constituents and our citizens.

As many people have said, this injustice has gone on for decades, like contaminated blood, Hillsborough and the thalidomide case. It seems to be the order of the day and the order of Government to make people wait for decades, to traumatise and retraumatise them. Baroness Cumberlege's review clearly took a different view from that of the expert working group and concluded that the manufacturer and the state had an ethical responsibility to find a financial scheme for those harmed.

Finally on my hit list is Bayer, formerly Schering, which said that financial recompense was not appropriate. Last year, its profits were $4.4 billion. It made millions off the back of Primodos and off the back of the damage that was done to our constituents. I am sorry, but this is not good enough for our citizens. It is not good enough from the Minister and it is not good enough from the Government. They need to get off their backsides and do something about this, because we, as parliamentarians, as campaigners and as constituents, are not going away.

3.10 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate and, as others have done, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her tireless work on this issue. She not only secured today's debate, but has been a powerful voice in this campaign for many years. I also wish to put on record my thanks to Marie and all the other campaigners.

The right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey), who is no longer in her place, rightly said that debates such as this show Parliament at its best. I commend the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). I also commend the speeches and contributions from the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who did some good work in this area as Prime Minister and carries on campaigning for justice, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb), the right hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), for Tatton, and

for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), who is also not in his place, the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Leigh (James Grundy), for Wolverhampton North East (Jane Stevenson), for Southend West (Anna Firth), the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and, last but not least, the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who leads for the SNP. Parliament has spoken with one voice and Parliament has spoken incredibly strongly. We know, as we have heard today, that it has taken decades for those affected by the hormone-based pregnancy test Primodos to be heard let alone be given justice.

Around 1.5 million women in Britain took Primodos in the '50s, '60s and '70s before it was finally withdrawn in the late 1970s. Since then, countless women have come forward to tell their stories, alleging impacts on their children ranging from congenital malformations, birth defects to miscarriage and stillbirth. The voices of these women and their families were not heard for decades.

The Cumberlege report, published in 2020 after being commissioned by the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead, and the Secretary of State for Health, was a watershed moment in this decades-long struggle. It investigated not only Primodos and other hormone pregnancy tests, but sodium valproate and pelvic mesh.

What the Cumberlege report found was damning. It concluded that Primodos caused "avoidable harm" and that the handling of this issue spoke to an institutional failure to take the voices of women seriously. The report made several recommendations relating to Primodos, including but not limited to: a full apology to those affected by Primodos, a patient safety commissioner, a redress agency for those harmed and a taskforce to implement these wide-ranging recommendations.

It is important to welcome the apology that the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care made in 2020 following the publication of the Cumberlege review. But, as has been made clear today, this apology was supposed to be the beginning. I am concerned that the Government have so far fully completed only two of the nine recommendations in the Cumberlege review. Four are classed as ongoing and three have been outright rejected.

That glacial progress is just not acceptable, so I will press the Minister on some key points that stood out to me in the Government's implementation update report of last December, and other developments since. First, in relation to the recommendation for specialist centres for those adversely affected by medications taken during pregnancy, the Department of Health and Social Care has reiterated its view that specialist centres are

"not the most effective way forward."

Instead, the Government point to NHS England committing to improve care pathways for the children and families affected. The Government's report states:

"The Teratogen Clinical Development Group has recommended a proposal for regional multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary 'hub and spoke' services to sit within specialised neurodisability teams".

Those services would support the treatment of children and young people exposed to harmful substances such as Primodos. However, the update report simply states that NHSE

"will explore this recommendation further".

Can the Minister update the House on where that work has got to?

Secondly, as has been highlighted today, there are concerns about the Government's approach to this issue. There has been a refusal to discuss the redress scheme, in contradiction to the Cumberlege review. There have been reports of refusals to meet with campaigners and parliamentarians, and news of lawyers representing the Government backing efforts to strike out legal action. The list goes on and is becoming more and more concerning. Given the High Court ruling in May, which I know many campaigners were exceptionally disappointed by, what steps are the Government taking to better engage with parliamentarians and campaigners on this issue, and do they have any plans to reconsider their position on redress and implementation?

Theresa Villiers: I am really interested to know what Labour would do if it won the next general election. Would it set up a fund for financial redress?

Andrew Gwynne: There seems to be a bit of a trend for the current Government, and Ministers supporting the current Government, to be looking to Labour to fix some of these problems. We will look very seriously at these issues and the situation that we inherit after the next general election, but I want today's Minister and her Government to do what they need to do now, not wait until the next general election, which could be 12 months or more away. We need justice and redress now.

This is not a party political issue; it is an issue for each and every one of us in this House—those who have contributed to today's debate, and the many Members who have not. On both sides of the House, we have to ensure that this historic scandal is comprehensively addressed, and the sooner the better for the victims and families. I sincerely hope that in her response the Minister will agree with all that has been said today, and that we can secure some very long overdue justice for these women and their families.

3.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing the debate and all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in it. We cannot help but be moved by the many cases that have been brought forward this afternoon. This is the first time I have been able to speak either in this Chamber or in Westminster Hall on Primodos because, as many Members have said, there were legal proceedings that ended in May. The claimants had until 11 August to make an application for permission to appeal, which they did not do in that time, so today is my first opportunity since that legal action to speak on it. A second claim is being issued by those who believe that they were harmed by hormone pregnancy tests, against Bayer/Schering. That claim was stayed pending the outcome of the first case and, given that the first claim was struck out by the court, there are now discussions

[Maria Caulfield]

regarding the next steps with that claim. However, I am free to speak today on the issues that we have discussed in the debate.

I want to be clear, as a Minister who is responsible for patient safety, that the patient safety element is the most pressing and important part of my role. Baroness Cumberlege is also a constituent of mine, so hon. Members can be assured that she lobbies outside Parliament as well as inside.

Baroness Cumberlege conducted a review, and the Government have accepted and made progress on most of those recommendations. As has been said, an apology was issued by Government Ministers at the time when they responded to that report. We have appointed an independent Patient Safety Commissioner, and Henrietta Hughes is doing an outstanding job holding the Government to account.

I will touch on the issues around redress in just a moment. We have set up the mesh centres for those affected by pelvic mesh; I meet regularly with those female campaigners to hear their feedback on the effectiveness of those centres, and there is work going on to review that. The MHRA itself is revising its practice as a result of Baroness Cumberlege's report.

Dame Angela Eagle: I think the Minister for her generosity in giving way, but this sounds like a typical civil service-drafted speech, if I may say so, mentioning everything but the issue we are talking about. We are not talking about mesh; we are talking about Primodos, and we want to hear about redress. Can she now please address those points?

Maria Caulfield: I can show the hon. Lady my remarks—they are on the back of this paper, and I have been writing them down during this debate. I am only two minutes into my speech and I am addressing some of the points that were made. I will of course come on to Primodos as well.

It is important to recognise that we did take those issues in Baroness Cumberlege's review seriously. We could not look at the issue around Primodos at that time because of the legal case, which I have touched on, but there have been some reviews. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) was here just before this debate. In his time as Minister for Life Sciences, he took the campaigns and the evidence around Primodos so seriously that he set up the expert review in 2014 to look at the evidence that was in place. I hear very loudly this afternoon some concerns about that expert working group and that maybe evidence was either misinterpreted or not looked at, but that expert working group did look at the evidence at that time and also issued a public call for evidence.

Sir Mike Penning: The so-called expert group changed the remit that it was given, with no recourse, as I understand it, to any Minister for permission to do so. It changed the terms of what it was supposed to look at, which is not what it was asked to do in the first place.

Maria Caulfield: I hear my right hon. Friend and, as I said, I will come on to that specifically towards the end of my remarks.

There were further evidence reviews. Hon. Members have touched on the evidence from Heneghan et al., and from Brown et al. in 2018. Those were looked at, and again there was no evidence of causality found in those reviews.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will, but I need to make some progress on addressing the points made.

Hannah Bardell: Causality is one of the key issues here, because it is very difficult to prove. The only way it can be proven is if those tests were done on pregnant women, and we all know that would be utterly ridiculous and absurd. However, we do know that there was association, and the bar has been set so high that it has become impossible for people to get justice. That responsibility lies at the door of the Government. Thalidomide campaigners were able to settle with the company. We need to look at how we can make that happen for Primodos campaigners, but the Government also need to look at lowering the bar.

Maria Caulfield: I take the hon. Lady's point that causality is a high bar. I am just going through the fact that there have been a number of reviews of the evidence so far. Baroness Cumberlege, when she set out the remit for her review, also stated from the outset that she would not be able to touch on causality for many of those reasons. There have been a number of reviews of the evidence, but I hear from right hon. and hon. Members some concerns that those reviews still have not got to the bottom of the issues that the families and those affected by Primodos feel that they have faced.

On the next steps, I have heard hon. Members. I heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who was clear about the drug being taken even after evidence had emerged. I heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) about the effect on her constituent Helen and her family. I heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) about his experience in Government and why these things often take so long. And, of course, I heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who set up the Cumberlege review in the first place. My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (James Grundy) has lobbied me hard outside this place on behalf of his constituent Marie Lyon and the many others who have been affected.

Now that we are in between the first and—potentially—second court cases, I am keen to meet and get to the bottom of right hon. and hon. Members' concerns.

Mrs May: I wonder whether the Minister might clarify one point about the second court case. The Government were a party to the first court case; that was the argument that they used for being unable to come to a decision. Are the Government a party to the second court case? If not, the second court case seems to me irrelevant.

Maria Caulfield: I will come to that in a minute. We are in between cases, and I want to make progress while we do not have a live case. Discussions are ongoing at the moment.

I am the Minister with responsibility for patient safety, and on this matter, I, rather than officials, wrote my speech. We all know that tragic events and accidents can happen, but I am weary of meeting families up and down the country who are victims of the injustice in the health service at the moment. I and the Secretary of State met the families at the Countess of Chester Hospital only last week. I met the families from Tees, Esk and Wear valleys, whose young children died by suicide. I met, as you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the families whose children died in east Kent, where there was an inquiry. I met Janet and Emma, the sodium valproate campaigners from In-FACT—the Independent Fetal Anti-convulsant Trust—and the women who lead the mesh campaign. I hear day in, day out about the injustice that many have to face, and about the fight to get answers to basic questions when things go wrong.

I am very happy to say from the Dispatch Box that I will meet the all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for Bolton South East, and other hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I am very happy to commit to a meeting with my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and with Marie Lyon, as well as with any other families who wish to meet, to discuss the Primodos case. If there are concerns that evidence was left out or not scrutinised, or that evidence in previous reviews is disputed, I am very happy to look again at that evidence and to leave no stone unturned until we absolutely get to the facts of the matter.

The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) mentioned the letter that has gone out to those taking part in court cases. I do not want people to be in a position where they feel that they cannot get justice simply because they cannot afford to, so I commit to looking at that matter and addressing the points that he made as soon as I get to the Department.

I do not want to come back to the Dispatch Box to discuss the issues around Primodos on an ongoing basis. If patients feel that there has been an injustice, and that there is evidence to support that, I am very happy to look at it again. There may be future court cases, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead said, but we are at a point where we can look at that now.

Mrs May: I am sorry; I did not say that there may be future court cases. The Minister herself referred to a second court case, and I asked a simple question about whether the Government would be a party to that case. I am grateful, and I am sure that the families will be grateful, that the Minister has opened the door to sitting down with and hearing directly from the families and campaigners. She says that she is prepared to look at any evidence that comes forward. The Cumberlege review is the evidence; it sets it out very clearly. That is all the Government need.

Maria Caulfield: To be specific on that point, the Government are involved in a second claim. We are not sure whether that claim will go forward—discussions about that are ongoing. As the appeal timed out on 11 August, I am happy to commit today to looking at the evidence and the Cumberlege review. Baroness Cumberlege is my constituent, and I am sure she will be pushing me for that.

Ed Davey: To follow on from the point made by the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the Cumberlege review has concluded. There are recommendations. Is the Minister saying from the Dispatch Box that the Government are not accepting those recommendations? We want to hear that they are going to implement those recommendations, not hear more evidence—implement them!

Maria Caulfield: Finger pointing is not exactly effective. As I set out at the beginning of my remarks, we have accepted the majority of those recommendations. We could not accept the Primodos ones while there was an ongoing court case. I have given my commitment from the Dispatch Box to review the outstanding recommendations in relation to Primodos, because I want to get to the bottom of this once and for all and provide justice for the families. I have heard from Members across the House about their concerns and the outstanding recommendations of the Cumberlege review, and my commitment is to look at those now.

Hannah Bardell: It seems to me that we are caught up in a quagmire of bureaucracy. We have had the Cumberlege review. We know what the results are. The Government said incessantly that they would not address the Primodos matter because of the court case. We now know that the court case was, in some respects, flawed, because the complainants and victims were not able to take their case forward as their information was withheld by the legal firm. As the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) said, they are now being treated in a hostile manner by the Government by being told that they will be sued for over £10 million if they take another case forward. That is an utterly preposterous situation. If the Minister really wants to get to the bottom of it, she needs to implement fully the Cumberlege review and ignore the nonsense that has gone on in the courts.

Maria Caulfield: I do not want to test your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I know that I am over time, but I have made the commitment to review the Cumberlege recommendations for Primodos patients. For those who have been affected by sodium valproate and mesh, we are making huge progress. Only this week, we introduced a statutory instrument so that sodium valproate can only be dispensed in the manufacturer's original packaging. We have the pregnancy prevention programme, which is drastically reducing the number of babies born to those taking sodium valproate. We are installing the registry, so that women on sodium valproate are better cared for and not taking that medication. Now that 11 August has passed and the claim was not followed up, I am looking at the Primodos recommendations as well. My commitment is to come back to the House and update Members on the progress on those matters.

3.32 pm

Yasmin Qureshi: First, I thank all Members who have spoken in the debate. In particular, I pay tribute to the vice-chair of the APPG on hormone pregnancy tests, the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell).

The many interventions on the Minister from my colleagues show that we are very unhappy about what she proposes and what the Government seem to want to do about this. We want to meet the Minister, but not in six months or three months; we would like to have a meeting in the next week or so.

Maria Caulfield: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Yasmin Qureshi: We want to sit down with the Minister, and we want her to say to us, "This is what we are going to do about the Primodos case." We do not want the Minister to tell us the problems. We want a system of redress right now—that is what we want from the Minister—and I hope that when we have that meeting, she and her officials will present to us the practical action they are going to take so that all the people who have been suffering for decades and decades actually get justice. We want her to tell us not about what has happened before or about the court cases, but about the actions she will take based on what the Cumberlege review said. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is muttering, but in the past it has sometimes taken us months and months to get a meeting with Ministers. I am glad that she has reassured us, and I hope that we will get a meeting in the next couple of weeks and that her and her officials will present a concrete plan for how to get redress for the victims. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I know that, strictly speaking, the hon. Lady has only two minutes, but these are important issues. If she wishes to give way to the Minister, she may.

Yasmin Qureshi: I am sorry; I did not realise the Minister was asking to intervene. I give way.

Maria Caulfield: I just wanted to reiterate that I have pledged to meet the APPG and all its members. I have also pledged to look at the recommendations specifically in relation to Primodos. I think it is important to meet the families and the APPG, so that we can make progress on this issue.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the Minister for that intervention. I look forward to meeting her and her officials, and to a great scheme that will help the victims of Primodos. I remind her that if we do not get our meeting, or if we do not get a satisfactory result, we will be back again—all of us. We have been fighting for the past 10 or 12 years, and we will continue to fight this campaign, because the whole House is united behind it. I hope we will get positive news at our next meeting.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that children were born with serious deformities due to the hormone pregnancy test drug Primodos, which was taken by expectant mothers between 1953 and 1975; further notes that official warnings were not issued about Primodos until eight years after the first reports indicated possible dangers; observes that the report by the Commission on Human Medicines' Expert Working Group on Hormone Pregnancy Tests in 2017 was inconsistent with other academic reports; notes that the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review, First do no harm, found that Primodos caused avoidable harm; further notes that the Government has refused to acknowledge the recommendations by the Independent Medicines and Medical Devices Safety Review relating to Primodos families; and calls on the Government to fully implement the recommendations in the Independent Medicines and Medica al Devices Safety Review and to set up a redress fund for families affected by Primodos.

Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): We now come to the debate on funding for the prevention of fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva, or FOP for short. I call Sir Mike Penning to move the motion.

3.35 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for the prevention of fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva.

Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am pleased you have pronounced it rather than me; from now on, perhaps we will just use FOP, which is what most people—including the families—call it, but the scientists do not.

FOP is a genetic condition; it is not an illness or a disease, as it is called all too often. It is very rare—one in a million. In this country, about 70 people alive have FOP, including about 30 young people and children. If we replicate that around the world, it is a very rare condition. The condition is probably the biggest nightmare for any parent, or anybody who loves a child.

Let me give an example: I played rugby, and I bruised very regularly. I stopped playing fairly recently, but when I did play rugby, I would bruise. For those who have FOP, there is a good chance that that bruise will turn to bone—skeletally, it will turn to bone. Most of us want our young children to be inoculated, and we have been through an inoculation process during covid, which I was very much involved with, but if someone with FOP has an injection there is a good chance that that trauma will turn to bone. I have circulated privately to the Minister, Mr Deputy Speaker and others some photographs of what that trauma can end up like and does end up like.

I got involved in this issue when a couple came to see me in my constituency and said, "Our daughter has FOP"—as a dyslexic person, I cannot say it to this day, although I have practised and practised. I had no idea what they were talking about. It is a bit like the previous debate: when we first heard about Primodos and the problems with it, most of us in this room had never heard of it. FOP is much rarer than the conditions suffered by the victims of Primodos that we have been talking about, or of mesh, valproate or any of those things, but the effects on those individuals and their families and loved ones are profound.

My constituent said to me that, as a mum, she looked at her baby and thought there was something wrong with her toes. The initial diagnosis from most paediatricians would be bunions—bunions on a new-born baby. My wife has bunions, but it is nothing to do with what she was born with; it is to do with the quality of the shoes she wore as a young lady. She will not mind me saying that, because we have discussed this case before. It is only sometimes, when people get in front of the right expert, that they get the diagnosis for what is a completely incurable, progressive condition and find out what they have. That is what happened with my constituents. There are three consultants in this country who have that capability, and they were lucky that they got in front of one. I pay tribute to the Portland Hospital where the diagnosis took place.

What does this mean for a young person? There are young people in the Gallery this afternoon who have the condition. I think the little 'un has gone home now because she was rather tired, and she helped me deliver a letter to the Prime Minister at No. 10 earlier today. What does it mean for them? It means that their whole life is different. Do we want to wrap our children up in cotton wool? No, of course we do not. Even if they have FOP, do we want to wrap them up in cotton wool? No, we do not, but they have to be extremely careful about inoculations, bruising, sport, and rough and tumble.

My constituents are very lucky. I have a very forward-thinking planning department in my local authority, which used the delegated powers it has to grant planning permission on the green belt—the green belt that I fight to protect in my constituency—so a specialist house could be built for Lexi, and she has the facilities where she can have the safe upbringing she needs. Lots of people were very worried about permission being given in that way because the condition is so rare, and I had people saying to me, "Are you really sure this baby's got this condition, and is this not just circumventing the planning rules?". It was only when I circulated some of the photographs, which many colleagues in the House have, that people said to me, "Okay, we get it," and two of them actually said, "We're really sorry. We get it."

Because the condition is very often not visual in the early stages, there is no understanding of it. It is a bit like a mental health condition. We have much better ideas about mental health these days, but when we walk up to someone, we do not know whether they have such a condition. If people go up to Lexi today, they would not know that she has FOP, but they will do in the next few years, when it will become pretty obvious. The interesting thing about FOP is that there is no set plan or rule for it. In some cases it progresses very fast, the bone grows very quickly and the effects on the skeleton, movement and mobility are very quick, but in others there are short bursts of it, while sometimes there is nothing for years and then it will progress again.

Given the reason for this debate—and I apologise to the Minister, to whom I have spoken privately about this—I did not want the Minister for Health and Secondary Care on the Front Bench. I wanted the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation on the Front Bench. It is nothing personal, but this is not an NHS issue. It is a condition that needs scientific expertise in research and trials, which is in the Science Minister's portfolio. I understand why, as soon as we start talking about anything to do with health, the Health Department goes, "That's ours," but on this particular occasion, it is not.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Can I just say that I concur with the right hon. Gentleman's comments about research and health research? There is a concern about how it is being handled.

Sir Mike Penning: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

Earlier, we had a short statement on Horizon, which was excellent in that the Science Minister was on the Bench, and when I asked the Secretary of State a few questions about FOP, he agreed to meet us in short time. The great news is that we will meet the Science Minister. The key to what was announced earlier is that work was being done before covid—and there is work on FOP being done around the world—and there was funding from Horizon for trials on FOP. The big issue was that covid interrupted the trials, not our leaving the EU. I am sure some colleagues will say, "Ah, that's what it's all about." No, it was nothing to do with that; it was covid that affected it. I put that on the record straightaway, and we now have the great situation that Horizon is back on stream.

One of the reasons I wanted to see the Science Minister on the Front Bench was to ask him this question. Perhaps colleagues in his office can elaborate on this before I meet him. The trials were halted because of covid, but have we got to start from scratch again or can we move on with those trials? I am old-fashioned and I used to be called a Eurosceptic, but we are now out of the European Union, so that is great. One of the things that was said is, "Well, you don't want to co-operate with Europe," but of course we want to co-operate with Europe. The announcement today on Horizon is a classic example, and the classic example of why we have to collaborate not just with Europe but with America and other parts of the world is that this condition is so rare and we could not do trials here. The scientists in America have a much bigger base on which they are able to do trials, and we need to learn from them and they need to learn from us.

So it looks sensible that we will be back in the European trials, but I am petrified about whether we will have to wait for Horizon to announce bidding on a certain part of the scientific research, and then wait a couple of years for that decision to be made. That is what tends to happen with these projects, but we are already in the middle of the project.

In trying to work out the best route forward—I am not a scientist; I am looking at this as a dad—we need two things. Research is going on into how we prevent the progression of FOP in the bone structure when there are traumas, and whether there is something early on that we can turn off. Is there research out there that can predict that? At the moment there is not, I understand. We have two situations. Can we in some way look at the future and at anybody who, family-wise or genetically, is likely to get this condition? Secondly, if a child has got it, how can we slow down progression? The families here with me today, and those in FOP Friends, would argue that they have this condition so they need help and research now, but we also need research to prevent what is going on genetically.

It also worries me how we need to spread knowledge about FOP around the world, not just in this country. In some parts of the world, almost no FOP babies are born. Just on a law of averages, that is not possible, and it has already been proven that there is no cultural link. Some genetic conditions are linked to what part of the world someone might have come from, but apparently they have already done research on FOP, and that is not the case. What is happening in parts of the world where babies are not born deformed and people do not instantly know. That sort of research desperately needs to be done. Lots of work is being done in Boston and around the world, but it is key that we are back as an associate of Horizon. Can we start not from scratch but halfway through and where we were before covid hit the project?

In a perfect world, we in this Chamber, and the families, would like to be able to press a button, perhaps give a tablet, and stop this progression. It is the most

[Sir Mike Penning]

awful thing to be sitting there, waiting for your child to perhaps have a bump, a bruise or a progression. As a group, FOP Friends make sure that everybody talks to everybody. It is better learning from other people who are in the same situation and not having to reinvent the wheel every five minutes. As I said earlier, people are desperate not to wrap their child in cotton wool, and to give them as much of a normal life as possible. Earlier I was talking to the chair of FOP Friends. He was playing badminton with his son who has got FOP, and I think he loses on a regular basis. There are things that can be done, but the problem with the condition is that it is not the same in every child. It will be different in every child, and it is different in its progression.

That is why this debate is so important, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to it. It is not a normal sort of debate. We have had a debate in Westminster Hall on this issue, which has such a dramatic effect on the lives, futures, aspirations and dreams of those families whose lives are affected by FOP. I thought, and my colleagues thought—some of them could not be here today—that we should bring this subject to the Floor of the House, so that we could find out where this research is going.

3.49 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for bringing this debate to the Chamber and for all the work he has been doing to raise these important issues within Parliament. It was good to hear such a fulsome and good description of the condition and how people are affected by FOP. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions, I am glad to be able to take part in this debate to highlight the issues facing people with FOP.

We have heard from the right hon. Member about just how debilitating this condition is. Usually caused by a gene mutation, FOP is the only known condition where the body changes one organ to another. Bone forms in muscles, tendons and other connective tissues, progressively and irreversibly restricting movement. This severely limits the ability of those affected to perform the most basic tasks of daily life. Children with FOP lose their independence just at the point they should be gaining it. Many of the issues affecting families of children with FOP are experienced by other people across the rare disease communities, including long diagnostic odysseys.

Sir Mike Penning: I apologise for interrupting so early in the hon. Lady's speech; she is generous in giving way. One of the bits that I think I missed in my speech is that FOP is not a disease; it is actually a genetic condition. For the families, that is really important. Americans talk about FOP as a disease rather than a condition, but really and truly it is a genetic condition that someone is born with, rather than something that someone would contract.

Liz Twist: I thank the right hon. Member for making that clear. He is right that it is important for the families. Sometimes in this House—even in our APPGs—we use a kind of shorthand about issues to bring people together. FOP is indeed, as he said, a genetic condition.

The rare disease community has some issues in common, including those long diagnostic odysseys. How long do people have to wait for their condition—I will use that term—to be recognised? There is a lack of clinical awareness with many of these conditions and limited treatment options for far too many people.

FOP, as the right hon. Member has said, is perhaps one of the rarest and most disabling of these conditions, with no treatment or cure. Within the rare conditions community, a diagnostic odyssey, as he will know, refers to a common scenario in which delays to accessing the right support and the right treatment—where it exists—can cause irreversible deterioration of an individual's condition. While there is no treatment for FOP, repeated investigations, such as biopsies, can trigger the condition's progression. That can be triggered by trauma, too. Furthermore, delayed diagnosis prevents parents from taking action to keep their children safe from situations and activities that could trigger injuries and flare-ups.

Unfortunately, a diagnostic odyssey is the norm for many children with FOP. Getting a diagnosis takes one and a half years on average, and more than half of people with FOP get the wrong diagnosis in the first instance, as we have heard. Despite genetic tests being available, FOP is not included in the national genomic test directory for rare and inherited conditions. Can the Minister explain why it is not included in that directory? What plans do the Government have to change that position?

The real hope for FOP, as we have heard, is new research. Like much of the research into rare conditions, it is likely to have far-reaching benefits for more common illnesses, such as osteoporosis, childhood brain cancer and heart disease. At the moment, the Government are overseeing a decline in research and international life science competitiveness, with commercial clinical trial activity in the NHS declining over recent years. We have heard from the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead about the STOPFOP trial, which is supported by funding from the European Union's Innovative Medicines Initiative as part of Horizon 2020. Is it not ironic that we are discussing this on the day we have heard that we are now in the Horizon programme? Thank goodness we are; it is an important move. However, there have been two years of wasted opportunities and uncertainty for people going through trials and research, such as people with FOP.

I understand that researchers would have to apply for new funding from the scheme to carry on with the STOPFOP trial. How will the Government ensure that funding continues to be available to allow the trials to continue, and to ensure real progress in diagnosing and treating FOP?

As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead said, time really is of the essence if we are not to lose the benefit of the work already done and if we are to give those with FOP, and those who may be born with the condition in future, the best chance of the earliest possible diagnosis and treatment.

3.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist). I thank them for their contributions, particularly the right hon. Gentleman for setting the scene.

FOP is an extremely rare condition, but it is important that the matter is aired in the Chamber and the right hon. Gentleman has done that well. He is probably right that the relevant Minister is not here. That is no disrespect to the Minister who is here—we know that he is an honourable person, who will respond positively within his remit. If another Minister needs to take the matter on board, we look to the Minister who is here to make the case persuasively to them, and hopefully we will get a response.

When the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead asked me whether I would come along to support him, I automatically said that I would, because the debate is about a health issue, health is one of my portfolios and I wanted to understand the condition. I have always had a particular interest in rare diseases. Long before I came here, I was a member of the Northern Ireland association for rare diseases. I am therefore particularly interested in the subject.

I will be honest: I knew little about FOP. I had to research it, and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead gave me some pointers. It was so interesting to read about it and to learn how rare it is and how little we know about it. FOP is an exceptionally rare genetic condition, where soft tissue develops into bone, creating a second skeleton. The right hon. Gentleman illustrated the condition clearly when he described the bruise, the bump, the jag or the discomfort. Around 70 known individuals are diagnosed in the UK, and the disorder has been described as impacting "one in a million." That gives an idea of the rarity of the condition.

The House is tasked with highlighting the issue and raising awareness, and I hope that the debate will do that. As far as I am aware, there are only two known cases in Northern Ireland, and they are twin sisters. I do not have their permission to name them, and I would not do that, but there has been public information about the case.

Sir Mike Penning: My hon. Friend has touched on the really important point of the lack of diagnosis. If we know that one in a million children will be born with it, the calculation for the world population is pretty obvious. We are nowhere near identifying the numbers that should be out there. In my constituency and in any other hon. Member's constituency, there are probably children who have been born with the condition. However, the length of time it takes to get a diagnosis—because the test is not part of the programme—is the most important thing. The condition can be tested for if there is a will.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman has made a simple request about diagnosis. Perhaps awareness can be raised of the simple test, which it is so important to do. I understand that the twins in Northern Ireland are rightly keen to raise awareness of the issue.

Such rare diseases are often ignored. Most people—including me before this debate—have little or no idea what it is or, more importantly, what we can do to raise awareness. But today we can use our position as MPs to highlight the issue, with the co-operation of the Minister and the shadow Minister. I cannot for a moment imagine what it must be like to grow up with a condition about which there is little or no information, not to mention what it would have been like when the twins were children, when there was no cure or treatment for the condition.

Early and correct diagnosis is key to changing the life of someone suffering with FOP, as the right hon. Gentleman said. This debate is a request for hope and for progress for our constituents. The purpose of this debate is funding, with the hope of a potential trial of the existing drug Saracatinib, originally developed by AstraZeneza as a cancer drug. The underlying issue is that if the STOPFOP trial is not completed, the money spent on it will be wasted. Given the progress of trials and the advancement in medication, it is right that every effort should be made to try to find that money to ensure that the investigation into that treatment takes place.

Sir Mike Penning: Like all clinical trials and all things in health, there are other things the trial could help with. I am not a scientist, but it has been put to me that while we are looking at clinical trials into FOP, there may be help for osteoporosis—brittle bones—and skeletal damage, particularly that suffered by the military. Even though we are talking about a tiny percentage of the population with FOP, the population with brittle bones is huge. It seems that there is very little cure for it apart from taking calcium tablets. If we get the principle right on what is causing the bone growth, perhaps the research can be extended past FOP and we can help millions of people in other areas.

Jim Shannon: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Whenever trials take place there are always benefits, although perhaps not the intended ones. None the less, the focus can be larger, whether it be brittle bones or whatever. What was originally a cancer drug has been found to be beneficial to those with FOP.

As initial funding for the trial is running out, the main asks are to ensure that additional funding is allocated, while ensuring that secured funding extends to allow the trial to include children, especially the screening of new-born infants—as the right hon. Gentleman has referred to. Many have said that early and correct diagnosis is key to changing the life of someone with FOP, so I cannot imagine how the trial could not extend to newborns and extremely young children.

Raising awareness is how we will improve treatment for the condition. I have been made aware that there are only three knowledgeable FOP clinicians in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That leaves patients often finding themselves treated by doctors with little or no FOP knowledge, which is rather disappointing, but focuses attention on those three clinicians. Like other conditions, patients must battle to be heard. Being aware of what to look out for is crucial: shortened or turned-out toes in young children raise concern, but if combined with tumour-like swellings, FOP is almost certain. It has also been raised that many patients are given biopsies and misdiagnosed with cancer. Others have had limb amputations, which perhaps was not the right way forward, but a response to not being quite sure what the problem is.

Having better access to a wider pool of experts would make a huge difference in diagnosing and treating people correctly. The charity FOP Friends, based in Oxford, is fantastic at supporting families. I have also seen some of the social media pages of parents of children who have FOP. Their work is absolutely incredible.

Sir Mike Penning: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way—thank goodness we have plenty of time to debate this issue. As he alluded to, there was a petition on social media, which was signed by well over 100,000 people. The Government's response—I should have mentioned this to the Minister—is that they have funded research into FOP, but I am afraid that does not appear to be the case. They have funded research into rare diseases, not FOP. That is probably crucial when it comes to the public's belief in what we do in this place.

Jim Shannon: The Minister took note of what the right hon. Gentleman said, so I have no doubt that there will be a response. The Minister has a genuine interest in the subject and I hope we will all be encouraged by what will have been said.

The parents are the main drivers of the campaign and the effort going into it is truly incredible. Many different people are making an effort with FOP Friends, whether the families, clinicians, those involved in clinical trials, ourselves as Members of Parliament, and, ultimately, the shadow Minister and the Minister.

To conclude, I thank the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead again for raising this issue with us today. He speaks so highly of his constituents. He does it all the time, by the way, but he did it again today. He has indicated to me that he is not running for Parliament again. We will miss his constant and compassionate commitment, interventions and speeches in this Chamber. He does not always do what his party wants him to do, but he always does what is right and that is what I admire about him as an individual.

It is important that we do all we can to help those with this condition to cope. We must do more to fund research into this trial. I sincerely look forward to hearing about developments in the future. To give those with FOP a better quality of life just like the rest of us, we need the Government and the Minister, from whatever Department, to help deliver just that.

4.6 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on securing the debate. I apologise if I stumble between illnesses, diseases and genomics; this is not my specialist subject.

Rare illnesses are collectively widespread. There are thousands of different rare diseases and illnesses, and each one can require highly specialised treatment. That means that people living with them can face the prospect of a long "diagnostic odyssey" before they are accurately diagnosed and able to access treatment. The various aspects of their treatment and care also often lack co-ordination. It is vital that we continue to strive for improvement and ensure that all those living with a rare disease get the right diagnosis faster, and can access co-ordinated care and specialist treatment.

The "UK Rare Diseases Framework" was co-produced by the UK Government and the devolved nations. It sets out the key priorities for the next five years for improving the lives of people living with rare diseases. Each nation committed to producing their own action plan based on how those key priorities will be implemented. The Scottish Government understand the importance of the framework and are committed to implementing the 51 commitments outlined within it. They also welcome the progress that has been made in Scotland in delivering genomic medicine and empowering patients through the UK's rare diseases forum.

In December 2022, the Scottish Government published their "Rare Disease Action Plan", which was developed through significant engagement with the rare disease community. Through their combined efforts, the Scottish Government will ensure that they are putting those living with a rare disease at the heart of policymaking, ensuring this meets the needs of the rare disease community in Scotland while reaping the benefits of a four-nation approach. The Scottish Government's action plan sets out four key themes to implement the UK rare disease framework: ensuring patients get the right diagnosis faster; increasing awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals; better co-ordination of care; and improving access to specialist care, treatment and drugs. The Scottish Government remain fully committed to ensuring that there is continual improvement in supplying patient-centric care that is safe and effective for those living with a rare disease.

The genomic medicine landscape is developing rapidly. In the last five years we have seen the implementation of impactful genetic testing for a variety of conditions, which has helped to inform patient treatment, allowing patients to receive the right treatment at the right time. Pathogen genomics is also helping to deliver "precision public health" by guiding investigations of infection outbreaks, antimicrobial stewardship, better-targeted disease control, and infection surveillance.

The Scottish Government published "Genomics in Scotland: Building our Future" in March this year. The Scottish Government's strategic intent is to deliver an equitable, person-centred, population-based genomics service and infrastructure for Scotland. This publication is the first in a series, setting out the Scottish Government's strategic vision for Scotland's genomics future. They will publish a series of documents in the future, explaining how they will deliver genetic services that will allow Scotland not only to treat disease but to prevent ill health before the prevalence of symptoms. Scottish physicians and scientists have been actively participating in the advancement of genomic medicine over the past three decades. Scotland has a great foundation to build on within the NHS laboratory network, but it is important that these laboratories are fit for the future, as we know that genomic medicine is on a steep trajectory.

Achieving the Scottish Government's ambition of having a genomics ecosystem with the infrastructure to support it will require investment in rapidly evolving technologies, skills and facilities. The Scottish Government will be innovative and adaptive to change, working collaboratively through the triple helix approach with academia, industry and the public sector to harness the opportunities at their disposal and deliver an integrated approach to genomics across Scotland. Their genomics strategy aligns with their rare disease action plan, and they will engage with the Rare Disease Implementation Board, as well as key rare disease organisations such as Genetic Alliance UK, to ensure that the strategy is informed by those who will benefit most.

While I see the intent and acknowledge the money being spent, it is clear that far more money is required to fund the research that is needed. The UK Government have overspent tens of billions of pounds on the Ministry of Defence, Crossrail and HS2—and, ironically, PPE

during a health crisis—which shows that the money is there, but it must be spent wisely. In Scotland, following the 2022-23 emergency budget review, genomics was allocated a revised budget of £5 million. Through the funding allocated so far in 2022-23, the Scottish Government have established the Scottish Strategic Network for Genomic Medicine and funded a genomics transformation team within the NHS National Services Division, led by a consultant clinical scientist and supported by clinical leads for rare disease and cancer.

Genomic medicine is an integral part of precision medicine and precision health. It can lead to earlier and more precise diagnoses, as well as more targeted prevention and management of diseases. Over the next five years, the genomics landscape in Scotland will be transformed as we work to ensure that patients have equitable access to timely, personalised and high-quality genomic medicine for a range of conditions, including FOP.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Minister.

4.12 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate and pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who secured it and who has tirelessly campaigned on this issue with his constituents and the charity FOP Friends, who I understand have joined us today in the Public Gallery. I pay tribute to the families' tenacity and bravery in raising the profile of this rare condition, and in continuing to do so. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) for being here this afternoon.

One of the great privileges of our role here is learning from the experience—sometimes the very difficult and harrowing experience—of our constituents, and learning from them about subjects that we might not ordinarily have come across. I have certainly learnt a great deal from preparing for the debate, and also this afternoon. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead for helping me to understand the impact of this condition, which he has done so eloquently and powerfully today on their behalf. I know that he worked with my office and other offices to ensure that all of us were well informed.

As we have heard, this is an ultra-rare condition, affecting only one person in 1 million, and there is currently no cure. However, we also know that what action can be taken is effective, both in diagnosis—which is crucial—and in care, and that people can some people can enjoy have good general health and reach old age, which I have been told is now over 60. It is my birthday this week, so that is quite close. I do not think it is old age, but they can certainly live for quite some time.

Early diagnosis is vital to managing the progression of FOP, and the average age of diagnosis, as I understand it, is around eight years old—as we have heard, the early signs include under-turned big toes—but greater awareness would mean earlier diagnosis for children with FOP. Families who understand that something is not quite right would be comforted to have that diagnosis. As we know, young children are not particularly careful or robust and, although we understand the dangers of immunisations into muscle, it would be a positive step forward for FOP.

Fifty-two per cent of people with FOP initially receive an incorrect diagnosis, creating more delays in care, with swellings due to flare-ups often being misdiagnosed as cancer or other diseases, which leads to unnecessary and potentially harmful procedures.

Sir Mike Penning: There have been limb amputations, and the damage that does to the muscle means it almost invariably turns into bone. Surgeons do not amputate a limb for the sake of it, and with the best will in the world, amputation is often more damaging and does not help the patient; if anything, it makes it worse.

Karin Smyth: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his clarification about that, which adds to the trauma that people are living with.

A genetic test can confirm the diagnosis, and we expect to hear whether the Minister has made any assessment about including the test in the national genomic test directory for rare and inherited diseases. Given the commitment in the rare diseases action plan, it would be helpful if the Minister outlined what discussions he has had on new-born screening for FOP and the inclusion of digital education resources relating to FOP. As we have heard, there are only three knowledgeable clinicians in the UK. Access to information and guidance on FOP would make a huge difference for all those living with this condition.

Accepting that the Minister and I are the B team, and scientists would have been preferable, it is important that there is good care to help people with the condition who may be immobilised at a fairly young age. Care for FOP and other rare diseases is specialist and complex, and it reaches across the health and social care systems. I am sure I speak for him when I say that we are both very pleased to talk about the impact on the wider health service. We know that we are very short of care staff more generally, which is not helpful for people who need care or their families. Those living with this condition are vulnerable to some of the wider issues in the care service.

More generally, it would be helpful if the Government could outline more support in the workforce plan, including in social care. Without an increase in the number of care workers, those living with rare diseases such as FOP will struggle to get the care they need. That is why we think it should happen, and it would be helpful to hear what steps the Government are taking to support the care workforce for people living with this condition.

We have heard that research is the greatest hope for those living with this condition, and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead has argued passionately, as have others, for the need to continue funding the STOPFOP trial. The amount of money raised by FOP Friends and the progress that has been made are an incredible achievement. We know that research into FOP will have benefits and implications for more common illnesses, such as osteoporosis, childhood brain cancer and heart disease.

Obviously, we are all pleased to hear that, after a very difficult and uncertain two years of frankly unnecessary negotiations—which have halted or delayed collaboration

[Karin Smyth]

and research—we will now be involved in the Horizon programme, which will be crucial to making progress in this area. A key commitment in the rare diseases action plan is to improve the Be Part of Research platform to make it easier for people living with rare diseases to participate in research, should they choose to do so. Again, it would be helpful to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to support those who wish to take part in the trial.

As we have heard, FOP can be devastating. The families want to live in good health and live their best life with their loved ones. I give my heartfelt commendation to those living with this condition and their families. I am pleased that people have come here today and I am sure that that visit to Downing Street was a really positive. The fact that we are debating this issue today is a testament to their hard work and commitment.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): Let me start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for securing this important debate on FOP and for his powerful and compelling contribution. As he eloquently and articulately set out, FOP is an incredibly rare and truly devastating condition. He is a champion for people living with it and for their families, and I thank him for that. It is impossible not to be moved when reading about this currently incurable condition and when seeing pictures such as those he sent me about it. I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say that hearing about Lexi Robins and her parents, Alex and David, greatly moved me. I can only imagine what they must be going through, and I send my heartfelt sympathies to them and their entire family.

I also wish to express my admiration for Chris and Helen Bedford-Gay, who established the charity FOP Friends, after their son, Oliver, was sadly diagnosed in 2009. I understand from my right hon. Friend that they have raised more than £700,000 since then to fund research into treatment and to support families impacted by FOP. I am sure that many, many families are incredibly grateful for all their efforts.

At the outset, let me confirm that I am happy to join my right hon. Friend in meeting the Science Minister on this issue. We already work hand in glove on matters of research, and the House would expect nothing less. It would be remiss of me not to also welcome the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) to her place and to congratulate her on her promotion on the Front Bench. I also thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for their constructive and powerful contributions to this afternoon's debate. I will endeavour, with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, to give as full and comprehensive a response as possible, given that I have far longer than any Minister usually has to respond to a Backbench Business Committee debate.

Let me kick off with a question asked by the hon. Member for Blaydon about the national genomic test directory. I scribbled those words down at pace as she was speaking. I will check and write to her specifically to confirm this, but my understanding is that FOP is a form of skeletal dysplasia, which is in the national genomic test directory. I will confirm that in writing once I have checked with officials on my return to the Department.

I want to assure the House and, of course, all families affected by rare diseases and conditions—I note my right hon. Friend's point about FOP being a condition, but "condition and disease" is a phrase that the Department and clinicians often use—that we certainly recognise and understand the challenges they face. These diseases and conditions have wide-ranging impacts, not just on sufferers' physical health, but on their mental health and on their involvement in the community, as he set out. That is why it is crucial that those affected by this condition receive the best possible care, from swift diagnosis to treatment, to improve their quality of life as diseases and conditions, sadly, progress.

To do that, it is vital that the UK harnesses our research prowess. Today's debate has largely focused on the power of research and how it is often the key to unlocking so much. Our universities, scientific institutions and healthcare system very much lead the world in this space—we often say that we are world leading in lots of areas, but research is certainly one area where we are. They have enormous potential to develop solutions to improve the lives of people living with rare conditions, including FOP. Let me be clear that the Government are committed to funding this research.

In July, the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Health and Care Research announced £14 million of investment to launch the UK rare diseases research platform. That is bringing together expertise from across the UK to foster new and innovative treatments for rare diseases and conditions, and to accelerate work to improve diagnosis. What is more, the Government are committed to funding groundbreaking research through nearly £790 million of new investment, again through the National Institute for Health and Care Research's biomedical research centres. There are 20 centres, all of which research rare conditions and bring together academics and clinicians. Their role is to translate scientific breakthroughs into potential new treatments, diagnostics and technologies.

Liz Twist: I thank the Minister for his comments about the UK rare disease funding. It is very welcome, and I am particularly pleased to see that some of those centres are in Newcastle, in the north-east. That is really important, as I will discuss in my Adjournment debate later. Will he talk specifically about research into this condition, which is what the families will want to hear?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady pre-empts my next sentence, but let me give way to my right hon. Friend before I continue.

Sir Mike Penning: I will await the next sentence with interest. I have been to Oxford and met many of the scientists who are carrying out the research, but bidding for this sort of funding is enormously complicated. It takes forever and a day to fill in the bids—a lot of time, and time is money for a scientific facility—and will not help with FOP because it does not fit into the categories that the Minister refers to. It is so rare that we have to bid for funding across Europe or with the Americans. Is there any way that we could simplify the process, so that researchers could know earlier whether they have a chance of getting the funding or if they are wasting their time?

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Given the complexity of the issue he raises, it might be helpful if I respond in greater depth at our meeting, where I will invite Professor Lucy Chappell, who heads up the NIHR, to explain that process. She is always looking at how we can improve routes to research and make it as easy as possible for researchers to come forward with fundable bids that the NIHR is then in a position to fund.

The hon. Member for Blaydon pre-empted my next sentence, which was going to be on FOP specifically. I am pleased to say that the Government are funding dedicated research into FOP. Since 2010, the Medical Research Council has funded three projects relevant to FOP. I will ensure that right hon. and hon. Members get further detail about exactly what the Government have funded.

In the last five years, the NIHR has supported seven studies specifically into FOP. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead said, the biomedical research centre in Oxford has supported the STOPFOP clinical trial that is exploring the safety and efficacy of using the new drug Saracatinib, to which the hon. Member for Strangford referred, to treat sufferers of FOP. Both the National Institute for Health and Care Research and the Medical Research Council welcome funding applications into any aspect of human health.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead rightly made a point about the challenges of designing trials for rare diseases. The efficacy and mechanism evaluation programme that is funded by the NIHR and the MRC may suit researchers who are interested in FOP, as it looks to attract studies with novel methodology designs that can deliver results efficiently and quickly.

My right hon. Friend and others rightly referred to Horizon Europe. I know that, ideally, he wanted the Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation to respond to this debate, but I reiterate that I work incredibly closely with that Minister because I have responsibility for all research funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research and through the Department. Moreover, the NHS is a vehicle for so much of the research that happens.

As my right hon. Friend pointed out, Horizon Europe is a valuable platform for researchers from across the continent to come together to tackle shared challenges, especially in areas of this nature where the number of patients affected, or certainly diagnosed, is very small. It has been an important source of funding for research into rare diseases and conditions, including the STOPFOP study. As my right hon. Friend alluded to, we have been negotiating the UK's continued involvement in the programme. I am delighted to say that, such is the timeliness of this debate, the Prime Minister this morning announced the successful conclusion of those negotiations with a bespoke deal in our national interest, as the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology set out in a statement to the Commons earlier today.

Let me respond to my right hon. Friend's specific point about how quickly research can be stood up. As of today, UK researchers can apply for grants and bid to take part in projects under the Horizon Europe programme, and they can do so with certainty that the UK will be participating as a fully associated member for the remaining life of the programme to 2027.

Sir Mike Penning: This is a learning process for all of us, and it is not just about FOP. As I understand it, Horizon asks for bids on certain aspects. A bidder can only bid if they fit into those criteria and then they have to wait for up to two years to run the project. The FOP project had to stop because of covid. To start all over again would be very difficult. I wonder whether the Minister will join me in that meeting to see whether we can slot into the process, rather than start all over again.

Will Quince: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. Again, he has pre-empted what I was about to say next. I listened intently to his question to the Secretary of State during the statement earlier today, where he secured a meeting with the Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation. Of course, I would be very happy to join him at that meeting. I share with him the view that if there is an opportunity for that research to be continued, we certainly do not want to see it start from scratch. At the moment, my understanding is that that research relates only to adults and my right hon. Friend, understandably and rightly, would like it to be extended to children.

Let me turn to the steps that the Government are taking to tackle rare diseases and conditions more broadly. In 2021, we published the UK rare diseases framework, which embodies our commitment to building a brighter future for people living with rare diseases and conditions. The framework identified four key priority areas: helping patients get a faster diagnosis; increasing awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals, which is something that my right hon. Friend is particularly passionate about; delivering more co-ordinated care; and, alongside that, improving access to specialist care, treatment and drugs. Since then, as was alluded to by the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan), all four nations of the United Kingdom have published rare disease action plans to suit their healthcare systems, and we very much work—and have to work—in collaboration on that.

In England, we published our second rare disease action plan on 28 February this year, which also marks International Rare Diseases Day. In that, we set out 13 new actions to drive improvements across the health system and we are committed to publishing action plans throughout the lifetime of the framework.

I touched on awareness of FOP and rare conditions and diseases more broadly, because my right hon. Friend rightly highlighted how a lack of awareness of FOP in the medical community can lead to under-diagnosis, missed diagnosis and, sadly, unnecessary examinations, which can exacerbate symptoms. That is why improving healthcare professionals' awareness of rare diseases and conditions is central to the rare diseases framework. I am pleased to inform the House that we are making good progress in that regard. NHS England has developed GeNotes, which is an online resource that puts information about genetic diseases and conditions at the fingertips of healthcare professionals. I am pleased to tell the House that resources dedicated to FOP will be added to GeNotes. That will help more clinicians to diagnose this awful condition, and sufferers will receive the treatment that they need more quickly.

My right hon. Friend has raised newborn screening with me privately. The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) also raised newborn screening for FOP.

[Will Quince]

They are both right that antenatal and newborn screening can be a vital tool in the early diagnosis of rare diseases. National screening programmes are implemented on the advice of the United Kingdom National Screening Committee, which makes independent evidence-based recommendations to Ministers in all four nations. While I understand that there are currently no plans for a national newborn screening programme specifically for FOP, I highlight that proposals for new conditions can be submitted to the National Screening Committee's annual call for new topics.

Liz Twist: On newborn screening, is the Minister aware that there is concern among the rare disease community about the limits of our newborn screening process? This is something that we are speaking about at the moment. We think that there are options for it to be expanded in a positive way.

Will Quince: I have heard that from other charities, groups and organisations representing those with rare diseases and conditions. It is right that we respect the independence of the National Screening Committee, which puts forward to Ministers evidence-based decisions, but it is nevertheless important that we listen to organisations that are making valid cases. I am also concerned about the length of time that the National Screening Committee can take to make decisions, review evidence and present recommendations to Ministers. In our meeting, I will happily discuss that issue in greater depth and at greater length.

Let me once again thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead for securing today's hugely important debate, and in particular for securing it on the Floor of the House. I express my heartfelt support for the entire FOP community: those living with the disease, their carers, their families, the clinicians and the charity FOP Friends, which works tirelessly to improve the lives of people affected by this devastating condition. I reiterate my thanks to all Members for shining a light on the condition this afternoon. I very much look forward to our meeting and to discussing this further. I genuinely believe that together we will continue to strive for progress and awareness, and support those living with FOP.

4.37 pm

Sir Mike Penning: What an excellent debate we have had. I apologise if I was in any way rude to the two Front Benchers when I said that I would have preferred the Science Minister. I will have the Science Minister later, so that is perfectly okay. I am very grateful to today's Minister, who set out some things that we did not know.

On screening, if we know about this early, we will save the NHS money. I know that an independent body looks at rare diseases and conditions, but for this particular life-changing and life-shortening condition, the aspirations and dreams of parents are changed dramatically the earlier they know, because the earlier they know, the earlier we can get those at FOP Friends who have been through it themselves helping them. The more we can screen, the more we will find—the one in 1 million figure shows that we do not know about enough people, because it does not work that way—and the more chance we will have of getting consultants who specialise in this area, rather than the three that we have currently. The more active we are in this area, the more scientists will want to come to this country and work at Oxford with the team there, and with other teams. That means that there will be a future for the families who are so badly affected.

I am enormously grateful to the House and to the Backbench Business Committee for granting a debate on a subject that most people freely admit they knew absolutely nothing about until bits of paper came across from my office. In particular, I thank Jon Mole from my office, who has contacted nearly everybody's office and said, "What more do you need?", including those on the Front Bench, because it is really important that we have that knowledge. I remember saying to him the other morning, "Have you given that to so-and-so?", and he said, "Yes, it's already gone." For instance, with the letter to the Prime Minister this morning, which I know the Minister received, I was told five minutes before coming into the Chamber that he had it.

There was a lovely moment outside No. 10 with the families and the affected children and young people. Little Lexi handing the letter in at the door of No. 10 was a very moving moment. Let us hope that with the ministerial meetings we are going to have and with the great news about having partnerships with Europe, rather than being run by Europe, which is really important, particularly with Horizon—*[Interruption.]* Members knew I would get that in. Let us hope that with those things and with the nations of this country and this great Parliament coming together and saying, "We need to do something about this," we can do it. FOP affects so few people, but the scientific research could affect a lot of families and help them in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered funding for the prevention of fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva.

Cell and Gene Therapies: Skills Provision

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

4.40 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What a coincidence to have one debate about rare conditions followed by another. I am pleased to have secured this debate on skills provision for new cell and gene therapies.

The emergence of new cell and gene therapies, sometimes known as advanced therapies, offers real hope for patients with rare and genetic conditions. Many of these patients have so far faced limited treatment options and endured great challenges associated with managing their conditions long term. However, using the power of human biology, cell and gene therapies can address the root causes of diseases rather than just their symptoms, preventing disease progression and even saving lives. In many cases, a single one-time treatment can be all that is needed to alleviate a disease. Not only do these therapies provide relief for patients from the need for lifelong treatments; they could provide long-term cost offsets by freeing up NHS resources and enabling patients and their carers to be economically active.

However, it is not only rare disease patients who stand to benefit from cell and gene therapies. As research continues, we could see a world where cancer patients can be effectively cured of their disease and where type 1 diabetes is addressed by enabling the body to once again produce and regulate insulin.

These developments are huge for patients. That is a point that I want to stress, because in all these debates we need to remember who is at the centre of this new technology: it is people, living their lives in the best way that they can, and wanting the best life and the best treatment possible. That requires us to recognise that research and healthcare have not always been equitable and that patient decisions to participate in clinical trials or receive treatments may be more complex than for conventional medicines, because of the very irreversible, one-off nature that makes them so transformative. That is why ongoing patient and public involvement is so important, to build better relationships between researchers and patients and empower patients to make informed choices.

I want to talk now about two of my constituents, Freddie and Louis. There are many stories about the transformative effects of new gene therapies, but I will speak about the story of these two young brothers. Following a long struggle by the boys' parents, older brother Freddie was diagnosed at 12 months with spinal muscular atrophy, a rare, genetic neuromuscular condition that causes progressive muscle wasting, as the Minister will know.

Freddie is a happy, social and determined boy, and he has hugely benefited from access to the lifelong treatment nusinersen, which his family say has saved his life and independence. However, they have faced challenges and costs in securing the equipment needed to allow Freddie to have the freedom he deserves, including fundraising for an all-terrain wheelchair that allows him to take part in as many activities as possible with his peers.

As Freddie was diagnosed with SMA, his younger brother Louis was screened for SMA and diagnosed before birth. As a result, Louis became the youngest pre-symptomatic baby in the UK with SMA type 2 to receive Zolgensma, a groundbreaking new gene therapy, at just 18 days old. More than a year on from getting that treatment, Louis has no signs or symptoms of SMA and is expected to continue to grow and live his life free from the disease.

As SMA is currently not screened for in the UK's newborn screening programme, Louis would not have received such early intervention had it not been for Freddie's diagnosis. As cell and gene therapies tend to slow down or prevent disease progression, early intervention can be absolutely vital. For more patients to benefit, we need not only a more expansive newborn screening programme, but a cell and gene therapy sector equipped for timely development and delivery of new treatments, many of which are becoming possible and available.

At this stage, I acknowledge the work of LifeArc, which has published a report on the future possibilities for cell and gene therapies in the UK. The report highlights what we need to do to make the most of the opportunities that we have.

So far, the timely development and delivery of new treatments is not guaranteed. The very nature of cell and gene therapies means that they are unlike standard off-the-shelf medicines. Specific infrastructure is needed to deliver them, from specialised manufacturing sites to specialised equipment in hospitals, as well as a specialised workforce, which is the focus of this debate.

The number of cell and gene therapies coming to market is expected to rise significantly in the coming years, but the current picture suggests that staff shortages could hinder progress. There is therefore an urgent need to prioritise skills provision. We need a significant expansion of the cell and gene therapy workforce. Studies by the cell and gene therapy catapult show that the cell and gene therapy and bioprocessing industries in the UK currently employ nearly 7,000 people, and that the number of highly skilled roles required is expected to more than double by 2026. However, there are significant barriers to achieving that: the highly specialised and complex nature of advanced therapies makes the sector particularly vulnerable to skills gaps. What we need is a UK-wide strategy and plan to develop a workforce that possesses the relevant skills that are desperately needed by the industry.

One hurdle is the limited public awareness, outside the academic world, of cell and gene therapies. Improving the exposure of career pathways will be vital, especially for potential technicians and other staff who will have less familiarity in the field. Proactive engagement with students as early as primary school could empower them to pursue careers in cell and gene therapy. That could include bringing scientists and industry experts into classrooms, or a focus on understanding rare conditions, cancer and the transformative effects that treatments can have on patients' lives. Heightened public awareness of the lived experiences of rare disease patients, and of the transformative potential of cell and gene therapies, should also feed through to higher education, but as it is very much a specialist field, science, technology, engineering and maths students need guidance on how to specialise. They also need to be equipped with the basic lab skills and experience needed to get started in the workforce, which is a particularly current issue for the industry.

[Liz Twist]

However, the industry will not be able to rely solely on new graduates. Instead, it will need to draw on workers in declining industries, such as oil and gas production, and attract people who have not been to university. The Government need to support the CGT industry to access all those potential pools of recruitment by promoting the visibility of the cell and gene therapy field and investing in training and development programmes. A first port of call, for example, could be working with stakeholders to create a central platform for job, training and education opportunities in the sector, so that those interested in the industry need only go to one place to find the information they need.

Most critically, the Government need to play an active role in equipping candidates with the skills they need, working with academia and industry to create a national strategy for placements and internships. For non-graduates or those changing careers, we should be taking advantage of the cell and gene therapy catapult's existing advanced therapies apprenticeship community and advanced therapies skills training network. With ringfenced funding and the convening power of Government, the Government could help to expand those schemes into a national training framework, to develop a sustainable workforce pipeline. Training bursaries may also need to be provided for those changing careers, so that adult workers can learn new skills without losing income.

At the moment, training academies run by well-funded individual companies risk undermining collective training efforts, fragmenting training standards and depleting the workforce pool for small and medium-sized enterprises. To tackle that, we need new forms of accreditation that can guarantee consistent and quality practice. We should also find ways to incentivise companies to share their knowledge to the benefit of the whole sector.

Of course, many of these issues relate to the development and manufacturing of cell and gene therapies, but if patients are to benefit from these new treatments, NHS staff must also be trained to deliver them, or we could end up in a situation where treatments are available but patients cannot access them. There is also a risk of geographic and socioeconomic inequities in access to advanced therapies. Without proper planning and preparation to ensure health service readiness, some patients could be disadvantaged based on where they live. That is why we need a national vision to ensure an equitable, standardised approach to the expansion of the cell and gene therapy field and the training of NHS staff. Accreditation passports, a central learning hub and provision of flexible, blended training opportunities could all come into play.

Geographic considerations are important more broadly within the sector and life sciences as a whole. While much of the UK's life science industry is concentrated in the golden triangle, the cell and gene therapy industry is generally better distributed. My local enterprise partnership in the north-east has identified cell and gene therapy as a key area of growth for the future, and the sector could offer jobs for people with various levels of qualifications across the region. We have to make sure that we are capturing the talents and experiences of people across the UK, not just in London, Oxford and Cambridge.

We also need to ensure that there are research facilities looking at rare diseases right across the UK. Newcastle is a key centre, and the north-east has an important part to play; I would like to stress that. The cell and gene therapy sector must work with local authorities to develop more locally responsive recruitment and regional skills pipelines, with greater information sharing between manufacturers and treatment centres to ensure that patient demand is met.

There are a lot of considerations here, but first and foremost what we need is a strategy—a strategy that will not only plan for the expansion of the sector but do so in a manner that puts patient need and care at the heart of its goals, because that is what this is all about. It is important that patients are listened to in all this and that plans are put in place not only to develop and deploy treatments but to ensure that patients are supported prior to, during and after receiving new therapies. As we upskill people to get involved in this space, we need to imbue them with an intimate understanding of the lives of the people they are working to treat, so that they might best serve their needs and understand their priorities.

I hope that the Minister can today provide assurances that his Government plan on delivering a detailed strategy to support the expansion of the cell and gene therapy sector, to allow patients equitable access to treatments that stand to transform their lives. We have so many opportunities now, and we need to make the most of them for those who are affected by rare conditions and rare diseases.

4.54 pm

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate. Before I get into the substance of the debate, I wanted specifically to thank her for raising the issue of SMA and Freddie's case. To answer that specific point directly, because it is an issue that I am alive to—I alluded to it in the previous debate just a few moments ago—my understanding is that the University of Sheffield is currently undertaking work that specifically relates to SMA and the gathering of evidence to present to the National Screening Committee. I hope that will be welcome news, and as there are developments, I will certainly keep the hon. Lady updated.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right when she says that a highly skilled workforce is critical to developing these therapies and making sure that UK patients benefit. The right training and education will also provide those joining this hugely important industry with a rewarding career that they can be proud of. The UK is a leader in cell and gene therapies: nearly a quarter of Europe's cell and gene therapy developers are headquartered in this country. The number of cell and gene therapy clinical trials conducted in the United Kingdom also continues to increase, from 28 phase 3 trials in 2020 to 44 in 2022.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, the number of cell and gene therapies coming to market is set to increase substantially, with over 1,500 clinical trials ongoing worldwide. Although the Government are funding many skills initiatives to prepare for that expansion, collaborations with industry, charities, the healthcare sector and—crucially—UK academia are also vital. The cell and gene therapy catapult, which is part funded through Innovate UK, is a key part of that collaborative approach, which provides practical training and identifies the skills that are needed across the sector.

The advanced therapies apprenticeship community, which was set up by the cell and gene therapy catapult with £1.5 million from the industrial challenge fund, is the first apprenticeship programme designed to train individuals in developing, manufacturing and—of course—delivering innovative advanced therapies at scale. That award-winning programme has supported over 300 apprentices, employed by 56 companies. In addition, the catapult has set up new state-of-the-art skills and training laboratories in Stevenage to sit at the heart of the world's third largest cluster of advanced therapy companies.

In its latest cell and gene therapy skills demand survey, the catapult forecast a skills demand of 10,000 bioprocessing jobs by 2026, a growth of 151%. Earlier this year, at the May 2023 life sciences growth moment, we announced £54.5 million to boost UK medicines manufacturing, which included up to £38 million for a new biomanufacturing fund.

On 5 September—this goes specifically to the point about education and schools—we announced that £5.5 million of the life sciences growth funding would be used to establish a medicines manufacturing skills centre of excellence. The hon. Lady is absolutely right: we want to encourage more people, and young people in particular, to consider a career in this field. Upskilling talent from similar industries will also help to increase capacity. Backed by £4.7 million of Government funding, the advanced therapies skills training network is a national initiative to drive growth across the advanced therapies and vaccine manufacturing industry. It has supported over 3,285 learners to date, providing training and supporting uptake of new talent from different sectors while, vitally, also upskilling existing staff.

Clinical staff also need support to conduct research and learn new methods of delivering treatments. The advanced therapy treatment centres network is a world-first network operating within our NHS. Co-ordinated by the cell and gene therapy catapult, it addresses the challenges of bringing advanced therapies to patients. The ATTC has produced learning tools, including a knowledge-sharing platform, with more than 270 resources, which has had more than 28,000 hits worldwide.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Will Quince: As was raised multiple times in the previous debate, the National Institute for Health and Care Research supports the development of researchers, including through its £790 million investment in the biomedical research centres, of which 14 out of 20 currently conduct research into cell and gene therapies. Cell and gene therapies are also a strategic priority for the Medical Research Council, and it will be launching its updated advanced therapeutics strategy, which includes support for skills and training, later this year.

Between 2011 and 2022, the Medical Research Council funded over £30 million in advanced therapy-focused fellowships. It has also recently launched—I am afraid this is going to be difficult to say, as it is a bit of a mouthful—a cell and oligonucleotide therapy fellowship, in partnership with AstraZeneca, which aims to develop links with industry through secondments, training and mentoring. Innovation hubs for cell and gene therapies, which is an £18 million strategic initiative with co-funding from the MRC, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and LifeArc, has published a skills and training strategy that sets out how it will support skills in the sector.

We recognise that we need a skilled, innovative and responsive cell and gene therapy regulatory workforce—that is absolutely key—and I am pleased to say that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency is working with partners across the UK health ecosystem to create faster, risk-proportionate and predictable regulatory pathways, which are underpinned by the recruitment and training of highly qualified expert assessors. This will support innovation and create a compelling reason for companies to introduce new medical products in the UK.

In closing, let me again thank the hon. Member for Blaydon for securing this important debate. The UK already has the skills to deliver new therapies, but she is absolutely right to point out that it is vital that we continue to invest to ensure we have the right staff with the right skills to develop and harness the potential of these hugely exciting new therapies.

Question put and agreed to.

5.2 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 7 September 2023

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

UK's Relationship with Mexico

1.30 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK's relationship with Mexico.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Gray. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving time for this debate, and I look forward to hearing from my colleagues, all of whom have a deep interest in Mexico and its people.

I am pleased to have secured the debate, not just because we are nearing the 213th anniversary of Mexican independence and 200 years since the establishment of UK diplomatic relations with Mexico, but because I believe that this is the first time since 1938 that Parliament has found time to specifically debate UK-Mexico relations. Given Mexico's immense economic, geopolitical and cultural importance the world over, I trust that hon. Members present will agree that this discussion is long overdue.

I am also pleased to say that this debate takes place in a far warmer diplomatic climate than its predecessor 85 years ago. I am sure that no one needs reminding that in 1938 our two countries had just severed diplomatic ties. The Mexican Government of the time, fresh off a progressive social revolution, had moved to expropriate foreign oil companies, which prompted our Government to suspend bilateral relations until 1942.

Today, of course, the situation is reassuringly different. For several decades, the United Kingdom and Mexico have enjoyed a close and fruitful relationship, the continued success of which will be predicated on the principles of co-operation and mutual respect. A shining example of that is the British Mexican Society, which recently celebrated its 70th anniversary. We can also enjoy the fruits of the relationship through the all-party parliamentary group on Mexico, which, next month, I will have had the privilege of having chaired for five years.

I thank the current ambassador to the UK, Josefa González-Blanco, who is a friend, as well as all her team at the embassy of Mexico. They have used their position to strengthen diplomatic ties at every opportunity and in particular to showcase Mexican culture on these shores. Few APPG chairs will receive the sheer number of invitations that I do to events hosted by the embassy, which showcase the culture, music and vibrancy that Mexico has to offer. Let me also praise our ambassador in Mexico City, Jon Benjamin. He is a good friend and one of the finest representatives we could have in Mexico City.

Today I intend to speak about a few areas. Let me start with our current economic relationship with Mexico. In 2021, Mexican foreign direct investment into our economy totalled £16.3 billion, and trade between our two countries amounts to £4.9 billion a year. However, there are many more opportunities to expand the relationship. Britain's imminent accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership should represent an opportunity to give a significant boost to the size and scale of our trade with Mexico. On the whole, that should be a welcome development, but I urge my fellow hon. Members to hold on to a degree of caution. As is the case with any trade agreement, the CPTPP risks falling prey to the organising logic of our current system of global trade, which, without scrutiny, can prioritise narrow interests over the wider needs of communities, working people and the environment. I hope that as a CPTPP member, Britain will work with Mexico in supporting the agreement's existing provisions, and furthering them, on issues of labour rights and environmental protection, which I know are also priorities for the Mexican Government.

In November last year, I asked the then Minister—the right hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands)—what progress had been made on securing a bilateral free trade agreement with Mexico. He assured me that talks were progressing positively. The Foreign Secretary echoed that sentiment in his speech delivered in Chile in May, pointing out the recent completion of a third round of talks. I would welcome an update from the Minister on those discussions and would appreciate him telling us whether the Government still plan to appoint a trade envoy to Mexico. I hope that negotiations will be successful and that a deal will be agreed soon. I fear that sometimes the Mexican Government feel like they are not the UK Government's priority; we must ensure that that is not the case.

In the Foreign Secretary's speech in Chile, he also sought to conjure the ghost of George Canning. If I may direct hon. Members' attention to another slice of our history with Mexico, Canning was Foreign Secretary during the Spanish-American wars of independence in the early 19th century. In that position, he resolved to swiftly recognise the newly won sovereignty of the fledgling American republics. Indeed, it was because of Canning that Britain became the first European power to establish formal bilateral relations with independent Mexico.

Conservative politicians are fond of that historical anecdote and reach for it almost every time they speak publicly about the UK's relationship with Latin America. It is easy to see why. At first blush, it appears to be a solely positive story. Considering that the UK's historical attitude towards the region has too often been defined by indifference or commercial exploitation, it is reassuring to be reminded that our history there started on such a bright mark. However, the version that gets relayed in speeches such as the Foreign Secretary's is doused with a more-than-healthy dose of myth. Canning's support for Mexico and other Spanish-American countries did not stem solely from an unnerving commitment to the shared values of liberty and democracy; it was part of a calculated strategy to advance Britain's imperial interests and consolidate its primacy in Europe. Canning said as much himself, declaring in 1826 that he had spoken

"the New World into existence, to redress the balance of the Old."—[*The Parliamentary Debates*, 12 December 1826; Vol. 16, c. 397.]

The Foreign Secretary also cited that famous sentence in his speech. In short, Canning saw the UK's support for Latin America as a means to an end. In the succeeding decades, that support was repeatedly withdrawn whenever it was politically expedient.

[Dan Carden]

The point that I am seeking to get across, which I think is the hidden lesson from Canning's story, is that for Britain to truly strengthen its political, economic and cultural relationship with Mexico—successive Governments have consistently stated that to be an essential diplomatic objective—we need to approach that relationship as something positive and desirable in itself. I believe that it is here that we find the true crux of successful bilateralism.

We cannot treat our relationships with Latin American countries like pawns on a chessboard. We cannot view them purely as opportunities for the wealthy few to further enrich themselves. Our support for the principles of national sovereignty, self-determination and mutual respect cannot be solely symbolic. We must not appear to be more interested in protecting a few commercial interests than in building a lasting framework for international co-operation. That approach to foreign policy is not only objectionable but unsuited to the 21st century. It is plainly ineffective. As we gear up for an age of genuinely global challenges, we have to lay the foundations for meaningful multilateral action now. There are no viable solutions to problems such as climate change that do not involve closely co-ordinated international action, and Britain is incredibly well placed to play a leading role in those efforts, but to do so, we must first shed the last vestiges of colonial paternalism and single-minded self-interest. The way that we choose to manage our relationship with Mexico and other countries in the region—and countries across the global south—will determine our capacity to play that role.

In my third and final reference to Mexican history, I will borrow from Benito Juárez, the first indigenous President of Mexico, words that capture the sentiment that I have sought to convey today:

> "Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace."

Let me say, in the spirit of those words, that I have no doubt that the Mexican people understand their country's challenges far more intimately than I ever will. For them, epidemics of femicide, disappearances and drug-related violence are not abstractions but terrifyingly common features of their lived reality. Some 152 journalists were killed in Mexico between 1992 and 2023. Every day, 10 women and girls are murdered by intimate partners or family members, and 100,000 people are currently disappeared. That is 100,000 families saddled with the heart-wrenching burden of not knowing whether their loved ones are dead or alive.

Of course, there are also the dislocating effects of climate change. As a result of its tropical latitude, Mexico is vulnerable to drought, food insecurity and the increased frequency of extreme weather events. The country's status as one of the most biodiverse places on earth further raises the stakes. I make those points not in an accusatory way; indeed, we in Britain must reflect on how our legal and social relationship to drugs, and our consumption habits more broadly, contribute to the enormous human cost borne by the American people. I draw attention to those issues rather to remind Members that the UK has to, as a matter of course, assert its commitment to supporting Mexico, and to helping it tackle these substantial challenges—not as a finger-wagging imperial power, but as an equal partner sincerely invested in that country's success.

I believe wholeheartedly that Mexico has at its disposal all the ingredients needed to develop into an unqualified success story. Its young population, burgeoning industrial capacity and rich cultural tapestry can all ensure that Mexico attains its obvious potential. For those reasons, it would be so encouraging to see a visa arrangement akin to that which the Foreign Office has secured with Uruguay included in any future trade deal with Mexico. That would allow young Mexicans and Britons to live and work in each other's country for two years. Such an agreement would allow a new generation of young people to join the likes of D.H. Lawrence and Leonora Carrington in being part of the great tradition of Britons finding in Mexico the dynamism and inspiration that allows them to produce some of their best work. I look forward to hearing the contribution of others on this important relationship to the UK.

1.43 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): As I am sure you and others in this Chamber recognise, Mr Gray, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) clearly has a very genuine interest in all matters Mexico, and I compliment him on his speech. I will keep my words brief, but I would add that he and I have met on other occasions, on which he has supported me in my role as trade envoy to Brazil. I have a wider interest in all matters Latin America, as does he. The trade envoy programme is an area where we can put our politics to one side and bring into the fold those with a genuine interest in a country. Whatever the political nature of Brazil's Administration—whether we are talking about the politics of Bolsonaro or Lula—my interest in Brazil remains unabated. I am just as resolute, excited and enthusiastic about the prospects for our relationships with all South American countries, including Mexico, but especially with Brazil.

I am sure that the Minister would like to reflect on these few words, and also on how he might see Mexico developing as a future powerhouse in the wider Latin American region. I know that he is very well travelled, including going to Brazil; I am not sure about his diary in relation to Mexico, but I am sure that he will expand on that as and when he speaks. I take this opportunity to thank you for your indulgence, Mr Gray, because I had not put in to speak in the correct way, and for accepting these few words. I give my compliments again to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton on his words. We are all grateful for the ambassador's presence here in recognition of what is being debated.

1.45 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am delighted that we are having this debate on Mexico. I did not realise that it is the first one since 1938; I was not here at the time—I have been at all the subsequent ones. We have had many debates on Latin America, and obviously Mexico has been raised on a number of occasions. One should reflect, though, that in 1938 Mexico was going through a massive social revolution under the great Government of President Cárdenas, which brought about so much social justice and land reform for the people of Mexico. There is a memorial to the people of Mexico in Vienna that thanks them for being the only country in the League of Nations to oppose the Anschluss pact between Nazi Germany and Austria. Those anti-Nazis in Austria and Germany have never forgotten the role that Mexico played at that time.

One should also reflect that, for all of Mexico's human rights problems, which I will come on to in a moment, it has traditionally been a place of welcoming for desperate people. Many republicans who had to leave Spain at the end of the Spanish civil war made their way to Mexico and were welcomed there, and they made a massive contribution to Mexican society. Indeed, many of those who were forced out of Chile 50 years ago this weekend, when the Government of Salvador Allende was overthrown in a military coup, initially made their way to Mexico. Some went on to Europe, Cuba and other places. We should recognise Mexico's enormous contribution in a very principled, non-aligned way on the global stage in providing a place of exile for people, which has turned Mexico City into one of the most vibrant, multicultural cultural environments anywhere in the world, because of the coming together of people from all over the world.

I have been to Mexico many times. As many will know, my wife, who is here today, is from Mexico as well, so I have been well educated on Mexican history. I always appreciate—the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) just made this point—that in Mexico there is an understanding and appreciation of history in a popular sense that does not really apply in any other country I have been to anywhere in the world. There is that sense of absolute pride in the Maya and Aztec remains there, but there is also pride in the pre-Aztec and pre-Maya remains at Teotihuacán, near Mexico City and in magnificent places such as Chichén Itzá and all the others that are so famous on the global stage.

Despite all the Hispanicisation—if that is not a tortuous word—of Mexican society after the invasion of the Spanish empire, the languages have survived. Indeed, some of the writings have survived in the great writings of an indigenous woman, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who was disliked by the Catholic Church because she could read, write and understand many languages and wrote a great deal of poetry, most of which was burned by the cardinals and others, but some of which survived and is now published in Mexico and other places. We should appreciate and understand that enormous cultural strength and history in Mexico.

If anyone visits Mexico, I urge them to stay two days longer, whatever their plans, and go to the National Museum of History in Mexico City. It is so wonderful and so large—it takes someone at least two days to work their way around it—but it is an education in itself on the history of Mexico and world history. There is an invitation to everybody: on any delegation, stay two days more, just to understand that part of the history.

Mexico also has the problem of its noisy neighbour to the north, the United States, and the history of that relationship, which has often been abusive. It was described wonderfully:

> "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States."

There were the USA's wars with Mexico, in which it lost a lot of its territory, but the solidarity that some showed with the people of Mexico is not forgotten. Indeed, in the north of Mexico there is a very proud memory of the San Patricio brigade, of Irish people who started off fighting for the USA against Mexico, decided it was an unfair conflict, switched sides to join Mexico, and defeated the USA—as you do. Again, we should try to understand that history.

Like other Latin American countries, Mexico gained independence from Spain, but it was not a liberation of the indigenous people or the poorest people across the country. The landowning system was maintained, as was so much else. It was the 19th-century Government that brought about the great changes in Mexico. Benito Juárez's constitution brought about rights, more democracy, and the beginnings of some degree of land reform and change. That was returned to in the 1917 constitution, at the end of the conflict in Mexico. We have to remember the rich vein of history that runs through Mexico, and the determination of people such as Zapata, who was a fantastic leader in many ways, to bring about justice and land reform in Mexico.

That is a fundamental point of history that we should understand. I wish that more British people who went on holiday in Mexico—well done them; it is good for the Mexican economy—would do a bit more than just go to the beach in Cancún, because there is so much more to see; as wonderful as the beach in Cancún is, it is important to see so much else. It is the diversity of Mexico that I fully understand. I want to express my appreciation to the many people in Mexico who have informed me a great deal, and hosted me on my visits to Mexico.

The Government in Mexico is that of President López Obrador, who is coming to the end of his term of office; elections are coming up next year, when he will have been in office for six years. I know López Obrador very well—I consider him a friend—and I had a very interesting conversation with him for several hours on the day before he became President in 2018. We talked a lot about how he would face the issues. Anyone who has aspirations to go into government here knows that there are challenges, difficulties, conflicts and all that, but think for a moment of going into government in Mexico and being faced with a huge problem of massive poverty, injustice, corruption, human rights abuses, unaccountable public services, and enormous numbers of human rights complaints against the police and the armed services. It is not a simple operation. One has to pay tribute to the work of López Obrador's Government in trying to eliminate poverty in Mexico, through a very large increase in the minimum wage, better rights and working conditions for everyone in Mexico, and work to ensure that companies are better employers, which has involved working with trade unions.

There are also issues of healthcare and other reform issues. In our conversation, I said to López Obrador, "Is there anything you particularly like, admire or would want from Britain, as you move into the presidency?" I thought that was a bit of a leading question. He stared out of the window for a while, and I thought, "Oh God, I've asked the wrong question here." Then he turned round and said, "The national health service. The principle of universal healthcare free at the point of need is something I absolutely admire about Britain, and I would love to emulate that in Mexico." It has not been completely emulated in Mexico by any means, but there has been a huge increase in hospital building programmes, general practice programmes and access to healthcare. Prior to his Government, the majority of the population had no access to free healthcare other than the weekly one-hour free advice that was given by doctors. Queues would form six and 10 hours before the allotted hour to try to get a few minutes with a doctor, which was all the

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poorest people could get. It is not completely there yet, but it has improved a great deal, and we should recognise and applaud that.

The population is large and youthful, and education is key. The country has managed to put a lot more money into education, new school building programmes and, above all, new university programmes. Unlike this country, it does not aspire to load anyone who goes to university with a massive debt for the rest of their life. It wants to get them into university for free education to ensure it gets the professionals of tomorrow—the doctors, teachers, engineers and all the others who are needed. We should compliment the Government of Mexico on what they have achieved in those areas, and on what they are trying to achieve.

There are huge environmental issues and concerns. Mexico relies heavily on a hydrocarbon-based economy. That was an issue for the Cárdenas Government, which nationalised the oil industry in the 1930s, and Mexico still relies heavily on petrochemicals. I would like to see a faster transition away from that to a sustainable economy. It is very easy for us to lecture on hydrocarbon-based economies' transitioning, but we must recognise the difficulties of doing that in rapid time. Colombia is going through exactly the same problems. Such issues are important.

I was pleased to attend President López Obrador's daily press conference. He has a daily press conference for three hours every morning starting at six o'clock. He gets there at 5.30 to get ready for it, and then he takes questions for three hours. It is quite a sterling performance. I do not think that any other President anywhere in the world would do that. He asked me what I thought about the idea, and I said I thought it was completely crazy. He was determined to do it, anyway, and he insisted that I sit all through one to rid me of my criticism of the idea, and I did.

I was very pleased to be at the press conference when he re-announced that he was very sorry about the way that Julian Assange was being threatened with removal from this country to the United States, and he would always be welcomed and offered safety and sanctuary in Mexico, just as Mexico has offered sanctuary to many other people in the past.

However, Mexico faces massive problems in dealing with corruption and human rights issues. I have examples, but first I want to pay a huge compliment and express my thanks to our ambassador to Mexico, Jon Benjamin, who is deeply engaged in Mexican society in every possible way. He is very well thought of and respected throughout the politics of Mexico, and has been incredibly helpful on human rights cases in which there is British involvement. I will mention some cases.

The Ayotzinapa 43 were 43 students who, in 2014, left their rural agricultural workers training college on a bus to go to a demonstration. They all disappeared—all 43 of them. There was a hue and cry, and international outrage, and the authorities then started a rapid search to try to find out what had happened to them. What did they find? Unmarked graves, all along the area where the Ayotzinapa 43 had been, in Guerrero state, but none of them contained any bodies of the Ayotzinapa 43.

The sadness and the tragedy of migrant people from central America trying to get to the USA, in order to get to some place where they might be able to sustain themselves economically because of the poverty in central America, is that they end up being prey to gangs and all kinds of awful things, and they end up dying in unmarked graves. Those were the kind of people whose bodies were found, that were not the bodies of the Ayotzinapa 43, although I believe that the bodies of one or two of the Ayotzinapa 43 have since been identified.

On my last visit to Mexico, I spoke to Minister Encinas, who is dealing with the investigation into all this. The Mexican authorities have arrested and charged a large number of police officers and army officers on this case, but they have still not got to the bottom of it or the truth of it.

I give this example not because it is the only example of the brutality that corruption brings, but because it is just the tip of a very much bigger iceberg. Many criticisms are made, some of them justified, but the issue is the direction in which Mexican society is travelling. Is it trying to find out the truth about human rights abuses, or is it trying to sweep that under the carpet and get away? The former is absolutely the case; Mexico is trying to find out the truth.

There are a couple of other cases that I will mention, one of them because it has a particular British connection: the case of Claudia Uruchurtu, who was living in this country with her sister and family. She went back to Mexico and lived in Oaxaca. She was involved in a demonstration against corruption by local officials, one of whom was subsequently arrested, charged and imprisoned for corruption. She was last seen getting into a van and was never seen again. Now she is declared dead and disappeared.

Claudia's family obviously want to know the truth; our ambassador, Jon Benjamin, wants to know the truth; I want to know the truth; and many others do, too. I thank Jon Benjamin for the work that he has done, and I thank Her Excellency the Mexican ambassador to Britain, Josefa González-Blanco, for the huge support and help she has given on the case, and for the work that she does as Mexico's ambassador to Britain.

Dan Carden: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising the case of Claudia Uruchurtu. We had the privilege of meeting her family when we visited Oaxaca last November. I also want to put on record my thanks to Jon Benjamin and his team, who have pursued this case all the way from the beginning. It has obviously caused incredible heartache for that family. I know that the Minister has had conversations on this issue, and I hope that at the end of the debate, he might be able to update us on whether there has been any progress.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and I endorse absolutely everything that he said. I hope that when the Minister comes to reply, he will acknowledge the severity and seriousness of this case, and will say that the Foreign Office will remain seized of it and will continue supporting any investigations to bring about justice. That will not bring Claudia's life back, sadly, but the prosecution of elected public officials for this is an important change in the legal process in Mexico. It sends the important message that when any similar case comes up, people all around the world will continue to pursue it. We should recognise that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley) *indicated assent.*

Jeremy Corbyn: I acknowledge that the Minister is nodding.

There are many, many cases that one could talk about. The one other case that I will mention is that of Miguel Orlando Muñoz Guzmán, an infantry lieutenant in the army who has been missing since 1993. He was last seen in Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua, and he could have been threatened with the danger of going missing. He has been searched for all these years. Although the Government of Mexico have taken some action on this case, we want them to carry out a complete, impartial and effective investigation to determine Mr Muñoz's fate.

Mr Muñoz is not the only one; his case is one of many that has been taken to the UN's Committee on Enforced Disappearances. That is because Mexico faces the endemic problem of its relationship with the USA to the north and the pressure of large numbers of desperately poor migrant people from the south trying to get into the USA. Successive US Administrations—all of them; Obama, Trump and Biden—have essentially taken a broadly hostile approach to migrants coming into the USA from the south, even though the US economy does incredibly well out of the work, which is often very low-paid, of people who have migrated there.

I have discussed this issue at length with people in the Mexican Government. Ultimately, the only way forward is through better economic development and prospects for people all through central America, in Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica and so on. All those countries need stronger economic bases, and they have elected Governments who are trying to bring about that. I hope that the British Government will recognise that it is important to have not just good relations with Mexico, but a sensible trade and aid relationship with central American Governments, to help them bring about better forms of administration, less corruption and less inequality in their societies.

There is so much about Mexico that one could speak about for a great length of time, but I will not go on any longer, because I can see from the clock the way that time is moving on. I just want to thank the embassies for their work, and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton, for his work as chair of the all-party Mexico group. We should see that the Government of Mexico are trying to improve the social conditions of their people. That is promising, and it is going very well.

There is an incredibly challenging situation, regarding relations with the USA and the historic levels of corruption and violence in society, brought about by the drug trade and drug war. While that is not for today's debate, we may need to think more deeply about dealing with the drug issue in the USA and Europe by conducting a war in central America, Colombia and elsewhere. It clearly is not working and has not worked. Tens of thousands of people have lost their life in this drug war, and it has not brought about any solution. That may be for another day, but it is an issue that we need to be serious and think very deeply about. I thank Mexico for its work on the international stage to try to bring about nuclear disarmament, peace and non-alignment around the world.

2.7 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Gray, for chairing the debate today. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) on making a well-informed and understanding opening speech about the relationship between Mexico and the UK. It was incredibly helpful for him to set the scene in that way and he demonstrated well that he has a huge depth of knowledge in this area. I congratulate him.

I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting the debate. I was also not aware that it had been such a long time since we had had a debate on Mexico, so I am glad that we have been able to have one today. The last thing I want to say in opening is that the small number of hon. Members here does not demonstrate a lack of passion throughout the House for the UK's relationship with Mexico. Unfortunately, it is a Thursday afternoon, when debates here tend to be a bit less well subscribed. Many of our colleagues would have liked to be here but other commitments have kept them elsewhere.

Thankfully, we have had a number of excellent and illuminating speeches. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). His depth of knowledge is, again, clear. Unfortunately, I have not visited Mexico, but the more he talked about the excitement around its history, the keener I was to go there. I may do so once my children are a little bit bigger because dragging them on to a flight of that length is probably not something that I will do at this point. Once they have left home, it will be one of the very top countries on my bucket list.

I will largely talk about the subject of the debate, which is the UK's relationship with Mexico, but first I want to touch on an issue in Mexico that we could learn from. In recent times, the Mexican Government have raised their age of military recruitment from 16 to 18. The SNP has been pushing for that for the UK's armed forces. The UK is an outlier in the matter, with only 13 countries in the world that continue to allow 16-year-olds to be recruited. We know from Child Rights International Network that UK Army recruits under the age of 18 are twice as likely to commit suicide while serving. There are massive inherent risks with 16 being the age at which we continue to recruit people into our armed forces. I would therefore urge the Minister in his conversations with Mexico and the people who have implemented this policy change to ask how it happened, how it was implemented, and what was put in place to ensure the transition went as smoothly as possible. That will enable us to hopefully emulate that change here in the UK and no longer be an international outlier.

Moving specifically to the relationship between the UK and Mexico, I want to speak about the free trade deal and trade with Scotland in particular, as Members would expect. Scotland exports to Mexico more than any area of the UK, except for the east of England. It is not in our top 10 export destinations, but it is a priority for the Scottish Government, and we are hoping to get it into the top 10. Mexico is the ninth most popular country for whisky exports, which is obviously a massive export for Scotland. Of the UK's exports, 12.5% come from Scotland, which is more than Wales, Northern Ireland and the south-west of England combined. We hope to keep the strong relationship with Mexico.

As the UK Government move toward a trade deal, we need to ensure that it is as advantageous as possible for both the people in Mexico and people here. I know the UK Government will be trying to prioritise wins in trade deals, but they have unfortunately set a disappointing

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precedent with the New Zealand and Australia trade deal in relation to beef and lamb exports from those countries. A significant risk is posed to Scottish farmers from an increase in beef and lamb exports from Mexico should a trade deal be signed. Unfortunately, given that the UK has already done these deals with Australia and New Zealand with few safeguards regarding beef and lamb, the Mexicans will be very well aware of that and will be negotiating on the basis of precedent.

I urge the UK Government when looking at the trade deal to ensure that they are protecting the rights and livelihoods of our farmers, to ensure that we can continue to grow our own food, and to provide some measure of food security for the people who live in Scotland and the wider UK. It is very difficult for our farmers to have this security if they are being undercut by the UK Government's poor decisions in trade deals. The UK Government must prioritise this when looking at exports.

On the links between Scotland and Mexico, we have seen an increase in the number of Mexican students coming to Scotland, which is truly excellent. There is a significant number at Glasgow University, for example, which has a burgeoning Hispanic society. That is a positive thing. Unfortunately, some of this has come about because of a reduction in the number of EU students as a result of Brexit. We want the immigration and visa systems to be as flexible as possible, allowing people to live, work and study in our country.

Obviously, the Scottish Government are not in charge of immigration. Constituents come to our offices every day with significant problems with the visa and immigrations systems. Visas are granted in some cases, but it is taking months and months for people to hear anything about it. In some cases, appeals are delayed or they win on appeal anyway and then are living in uncertainty. Because of this oppositional immigration system, we are not able to attract the talent that we would like to from Mexico or other countries, and this is because we in Scotland do not have control of our own immigration system. The UK Government should look again at the lag in visas and the issues that that causes, particularly for people coming to work and study, because it makes Scotland and the UK a less positive destination. People are less likely to want to come and live and work here purely because of the ridiculous hoops, bureaucracy and time lags in our immigration system.

The right hon. Member for Islington North mentioned hydrocarbon-based economies. That is an important link that Scotland, particularly the north-east, has with Mexico and other Latin American countries—oil-producing countries. A significant number of my constituents have spent time in places such as Mexico, Texas, Dubai and Norway. They probably have a slightly different profile from the majority of constituents across this House and these isles who go to visit those countries. We can learn a lot of good practices and positive things from each other in relation to this issue.

Obviously, we have a declining ability to access oil and gas. We are doing what we can to move towards a just transition. Scotland is doing what it can to meet its climate change targets and try to provide economic certainty for the regions. We have put additional moneys into the just transition, which the UK Government have failed to match. Although the UK Government are not doing as much as I would like on that just transition, there is still a significant amount to learn and a lot of positive knowledge to share to ensure that the transition away from hydrocarbon-based economies is as non-negative as possible.

We do not want what happened to the mining communities. We want a planned transition so that the people coming out of jobs in oil and gas—whether in Aberdeen in the north-east of Scotland, the UK or Mexico—have jobs to go to, and so that those skills, particularly the ones applicable to renewables, can be utilised as widely as possible. We could have a positive relationship with Mexico regarding that move.

There is also the opportunity for us to trade in decommissioning, for example, given the incredible amount of experience and expertise in and around Aberdeen. We are one of the first countries in the world to be doing decommissioning en masse. As other countries move into that space, we should be utilising our economic powers and opportunities to be able to share that. Also, with the continental shelf, the UK is the gold standard for safety. Things have been not quite so good recently, but certainly previously we were the gold standard. If we can, it would be great to ensure that other countries decommission as safely as possible in order to protect both our environment and the men, mostly, who are working on it.

Lastly, on democracy, the Mexican president has gone on record to say that the UK Government must honour the principles of "participant democracy" and allow an independence referendum. We welcome that support. Scotland has continually voted for the SNP standing on a manifesto that includes an independence referendum. We have an incredibly positive relationship with Mexico, including an honorary consulate in Glasgow to ensure that we keep those strong links. We recognise and appreciate the support for our democratic right to an independence referendum, and we thank the Mexican president and the country of Mexico for the honorary consulate and for their support for Scotland's democratic voice to be heard.

2.18 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Gray, especially on this wonderful, warm and fabulous Thursday.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for securing this debate. As we know, he brings strong knowledge to this place on international relations, not only because of his role as president of the Forum of Young Parliamentarians of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, but because of his leadership of the APPG on Mexico. As we work to reconnect Britain with our friends and partners around the world, it is essential to engage closely through Parliament and inter-parliamentary institutions. It is through these organisations that we help to build consensus on issues important to all our countries—from trade, to human rights, to the rule of law and the importance of the international rules-based order.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton is clearly doing an absolutely sterling job on that account, including with this debate. I express my thanks on behalf of the Opposition to him and all those who play such an important role in forging and developing the

ties that bind our two countries ever closer together. That includes our diplomats, but equally businesses and civil society leaders.

I thoroughly enjoyed listening to the contribution by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). I have now absolutely clocked his plea for us to add two days to any trip that we might be lucky enough to have to Mexico. I would certainly love to go round a museum like that to show me the depth of the history and the beauty of the culture of this amazing nation. If I am completely honest, UK-Mexico relations are not yet an area of expertise for me—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): Not yet.

Ms Brown: Not yet. So I hope colleagues will forgive me if I keep my remarks briefer than normal on this occasion. I add my voice to those saying what an absolute privilege it is to be joined by Ambassador Josefa González-Blanco Ortiz-Mena and her embassy team today, who work tirelessly to strengthen the ties between our nations. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) on her appointment to the Labour Foreign, Commonwealth and Development team as shadow Minister for Latin America and the Caribbean. Unfortunately she cannot be here today, but I am delighted to be here instead.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton stated, 2023 marks the bicentennial anniversary of the start of formal diplomatic relations between the UK and Mexico, and next week on 16 September Mexicans will celebrate their independence day. The Opposition wants to extend our warmest wishes for that happy event. Strengthening our relationship with Mexico can only bring significant benefits to both our countries. Mexico, as we know, is the second largest economy in Latin America and the 16th largest in the world, and its demand for exports is expected to increase by over a third by 2035. So much more can be done to raise awareness and to seize trade and investment opportunities. Sadly, Mexico accounted for only 0.3% of UK trade in 2021, making them our 44th largest trading partner.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend will be aware that the huge Tren Maya project that the Government of Mexico have been pursuing to build a 15,000 km railway line across the southern part of Mexico will be joined by some British Railways rolling stock in the near future. It is being shipped from Great Yarmouth as we speak to help make up the rolling stock needs of the new railway, so there is an improvement. There is an awful lot of railway technology in Britain that could well be marketed in Mexico.

Ms Brown: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that information. As the Foreign Secretary said earlier this year,

> "With some British businesses, they don't think of Latin America"

so I hope the Minister will expand on what the Government are doing to change that, to build on the example that my right hon. Friend has just given us, and to create new opportunities following our signing of the CPTPP trade agreement in July. As we know, once this agreement is in force next year, it should lower certain barriers to trade and enable our economic ties to deepen. At present, our trade is based on a continuity agreement following Brexit and, unfortunately, this covers only goods, leaving out our strong service industries, including creative, digital, financial and legal. I hope the Minister might be able to explain what progress is being made on the prospects for an expanded bilateral agreement that takes better account of the UK's strengths and how global trade has changed over the 20 years since the Mexico-EU agreement was struck. Since May last year, three rounds of talks have concluded. In what ways do these talks include climate change, human rights and workers' rights? I know they are also priorities for Mexico.

In the 2021 integrated review, the Government stated:

> "We will deepen our ties with Brazil and Mexico, strengthening partnerships on trade, innovation, climate, security and development".

How does the Minister think that we can achieve a greater synergy between Mexico's trade priorities and our own? As we know, Mexico plays a critical role in the region's geopolitics, so what steps are being taken to make that strategic commitment to Mexico a reality? Why has no prime ministerial trade envoy to Mexico been appointed? Can the Minister account for that? There are so many opportunities for stronger connections and partnerships, and some of my hon. Friends have participated in roles like that and made a real difference. It might be something to consider.

Mexico has significant lithium deposits, and some states reportedly have rare earth resources. As we know, securing a reliable supply chain for these minerals will be even more essential as the UK decarbonises its economy. Under a Labour Government, which we hope to see soon, that will be a still greater priority given our ambition for a rapid shift to green energy and green industries.

Both the UK and Mexico have strong and distinctive drinks industries. I must admit that I am a tequila fan. The UK is the fifth-largest importer of Mexican tequila in the world and, as we have heard from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), Mexico is the seventh-largest export market for Scotch by volume. I also like a Scotch. Surely there is potential to get more economic value from those trading flows for our mutual benefit.

As all Members have noted, there are significant concerns about the rule of law, human rights and insecurity in parts of Mexico. When it comes to our friends and partners, we must have the courage and conviction to speak honestly and frankly on a variety of issues. In response to those concerns, the Government have committed to establish a formal bilateral human rights dialogue with Mexico, which will complement their trade negotiations. I welcome that, but we have sadly not heard when the dialogue will begin, or if it has already begun, and I hope that the Minister will update us on that.

Reconnecting Britain with our partners around the world is a vital objective for the Opposition, and our relationship with Mexico is clearly a high priority within that, so I hope the Minister will be able to reassure us that significant progress is being made on strengthening our connections with this important partner.

2.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve once again with you in the Chair, Mr Gray, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) on securing this debate. I pay tribute to him, as everyone else has, for his interest in Mexico and international relations—in particular our partnership with Mexico—and for his sterling work as chair of the APPG, not just for five months or a year or two, but for five years. That shows real commitment, which is much appreciated on both sides of the House.

We are also grateful that Her Excellency the Mexican ambassador is here with us today. She is a formidable, energetic partner and friend. We work hard to try to keep up with her enthusiasm for things to do with the UK and for binding our relationship. We are extraordinarily grateful for the work of her team and for our partnership.

I am grateful for all the contributions that have been made today. I welcome the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) to her place, talking about such matters. I always think of her in relation to other international priorities, but it is great to see her. I also say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for his interest and commitment. He is a good man with a big heart and he will be missed. We all know about reshuffles—you gotta love 'em, but they don't always go your way. We wish him well and thank him for his work in this area. We also welcome the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) to her role, and look forward to debates with her.

This goes without saying, but I want to say it on the record with full passion and conviction: the UK values our relationship with Mexico enormously. The two countries share deep and historic links. We are looking forward to the future with new and ambitious partnerships based on two most crucial values, democracy and freedom. Today, we have had some great lessons from people with a huge amount of experience in Mexico about our relationship. We look forward to celebrating with Mexico its independence day next week. In fact, I think I am going to the embassy—the ambassador gives me a wink to suggest that that is true. I am looking forward to it. Mexico knows how to have a party, how to celebrate well, and how we can move relationships forward.

Some important points were made about history, not least by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). We are grateful for what he set out about the history and for his reminder to all of us, and anyone who goes to Mexico, that there is more to see beyond the beaches. When I visit Mexico, I never see much of beaches, because I am tied up with meetings, but I can attest that there is a lot more to Mexico than the beaches, which I do not know much about. The relationships between our Parliaments and parliamentarians are important, and I know that the right hon. Member's relationships with the President, Cabinet and Government have enabled our dialogue and friendship to be fostered. I am grateful to him for that.

The debate has shown that our relationship with Mexico goes well beyond party politics. Across the spectrum, and across the different nations in the UK, it is an important relationship. I will set out why I believe that it is one that we need to put a lot more focus on, as has been said by others.

One thing that has not been mentioned enough is the importance of Cornwall and the Cornish miners who brought their famous pasties—pastes, as they are known in the region—to the mines of Hidalgo in 1825. Now, half a million people travel from the UK to Mexico each year, and 3,000 Mexican students have experienced our fantastic education system through Chevening scholarships. All those things are weaved into our relationship and help to strengthen it. We want to ensure that that relationship gets stronger.

Of course, it goes without saying that those Cornish miners did not only bring pasties; they brought football. Football speaks volumes. Even the hon. Member for West Ham has to agree that Mexicans pack a punch on the football pitch. We are so pleased that Mexico will co-host the World cup in 2026, providing another opportunity for our countries to work together—although we hope that it does not do too well in the competition at our expense.

This debate is also timely because the UK and Mexico are preparing to celebrate the 200th anniversary of our consular relations, which falls next month. We are busy planning a series of activities to celebrate all parts of our relationship, from exploring our shared histories in conversations with historians to cultivating more recent cultural links through art and musical performances. Such activities will showcase the breadth of exchange over 200 years, which has seen our relationship go from strength to strength.

In the past year, our Ministers have been in regular conversation. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business and Trade visited in February, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary met the then Foreign Minister in the spring. I received an incredibly warm welcome when I was fortunate enough to travel to Mexico in May. During my visit, I met the Minister responsible for human rights, discussed our bilateral relations and ties with members of the Mexican Congress's UK-Mexico friendship group—focusing particularly on the free trade agreement—and saw at first hand the impact that our excellent collaboration on climate programmes is having in Guadalajara and elsewhere.

I commend the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton on the success of the Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation that he led to Mexico at the end of last year. Time flies—where is this year going? I am glad that he and other hon. Members had an interesting and productive visit, not just to Mexico City but in Oaxaca.

Mexicans are looking forward to the presidential elections next year. We will work closely with whomever they elect as their new President, to continue our growing relationship. As has been said, this goes beyond party politics; on both sides, this is an important relationship. I know that some comments were made about our relationship and how it should be fostered. I would just like to say, in terms of my experience and the work that we are striving to do—I am sure that this cuts across parties—that it must be based on shared values, shared priorities and mutual benefit. When there is that sort of relationship, built on trust, things will move forward.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

David Rutley: I will.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. As the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) has only just arrived in the Chamber, I am not sure that that would be appropriate. If the Minister would like to continue—

David Rutley: On this occasion, given that this is a former Foreign Secretary, I think, with your permission, Mr Gray—

James Gray (in the Chair): No, I do not think so at all. The right hon. Gentleman may be a former Foreign Secretary, but he was not here for the debate; he has just arrived in the Chamber. He may not intervene, and the Minister will continue his winding-up speech.

David Rutley: I bow to your judgment, Mr Gray.

Another key thing in the relationship is about building capacity and building strength on both sides of the relationship. We are absolutely committed to doing that to create a sense of genuine partnership. With existing free trade agreements with 46 countries, and others on the way, Mexico is without a doubt a titan of free trade; and with the second largest economy in Latin America, Mexico's demand for imports is only set to grow. We look forward to using our bilateral relationship to give fresh opportunities to British businesses across multiple sectors.

I did not agree with absolutely everything that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, but she said many wise things. She may already know this stat, but last year alone, whisky exports were up by 22%. I have to say that, for a teetotaller, I know a lot about the flow of spirits that sees whisky going from one side and tequila the other way. I know that Members here appreciate that.

As we look to this mature trade relationship, there are of course opportunities, particularly in offshore wind and particularly in north-east Scotland. There are huge opportunities across the region, including in north-east Brazil, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) knows as the trade envoy for Brazil, and in Costa Rica and the US. Wherever I go, we talk about this relationship and these opportunities.

The recently signed comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—known as the CPTPP to its friends—presents us with significant opportunities. British businesses will benefit from enhanced access to the Mexican and other markets. Our exporters will enjoy reduced tariffs when selling to Mexico, including on our high-quality beef, pork and apples, and UK consumers will pay less for Mexican products such as honey and chocolate. I say gently to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North, because I know that she cares about this, that animal welfare protections are and will continue to be in place. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and other Ministers have set that out, as I did when I served several years ago as the Minister with responsibility for food.

British businesses will benefit from enhanced market access without a doubt. Our friends in Mexico know how keen I am for them to ratify the UK's accession to the CPTPP soon. It was the clear focus of my recent visit. Also during that visit, we talked a lot about the third round of negotiations on the UK-Mexico free trade agreement. That will be an important pillar of our relationship, and the opportunities that it will present to develop exports in both directions are huge. We have had three productive rounds of FTA negotiations so far. Both countries are united in their objective to build a bilateral agreement to complement the CPTPP and provide a solid framework in which our bilateral trade relationship can flourish, including by strengthening commitments to support small and medium-sized enterprises, innovation, trade and gender equality. Together with colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade, I am determined to ensure that the new deal adds value to the UK economy and brings benefits across the country, as well as to our friends in Mexico.

I very much hope that more UK companies will take up the trade opportunities that anybody who goes to Mexico will see. When I was in Guadalajara, I was able to understand more about the benefits that Diageo and AstraZeneca see in that great city. With Mexico's increasing expertise in advanced manufacturing, the opportunities for friendshoring and closer relationships should be clear to all. We need to ensure that those opportunities are made fully available to UK companies and bring them to Mexico.

There were a few references to a potential trade envoy to Mexico. I know that that issue has been raised on a few occasions. The Government continue to review countries where such an appointment would be of greatest benefit. Obviously, the ultimate decision is for the Prime Minister, but my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North does an outstanding job in Brazil, and my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) does an amazing job in Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Peru. The comments made today have been fully noted, and I am sure that the work that the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton has done will be noted in any conversations or decisions about this particular opportunity.

We recognise that in a debate about Mexico it is important to address and acknowledge the complex issues of human rights. That has been a concern in the country for many years, and it continues to be an area of focus. I recognise the important work of our ambassador, Jon Benjamin, who has been referenced by many people in this debate. He has a principled, patient and passionate stance, which is exemplary, and he is seeking to engage at the appropriate levels in Mexico. There is no question but that it is a dangerous country in which to be an environmental activist or a journalist.

Jeremy Corbyn: On the question of human rights, I assume from what the Minister said that the continuing trade discussions with Mexico will include a human rights dialogue. Will he also give a commitment that the Government will remain supportive of the family of Claudia Uruchurtu and their needs in her case, not just for her but as an example of our willingness to support people who are trying to bring about human rights and justice? There are concerns that the mayor who was imprisoned after Claudia's disappearance, Lizbeth Victoria Huerta, may well be released at the end of September, because she was not charged, in my view, with a sufficiently severe case put against her. There are concerns about the safety of the family as a result.

David Rutley: As far as the free trade agreement goes, obviously those conversations—that dialogue—will be moved forward. Human rights in our relationship with

[David Rutley]

Mexico are being dealt with in a different track, and I will come on to that in a minute in terms of a formal human rights dialogue. I will also mention the case that the right hon. Gentleman talked about. All those points are important.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about the recognition of disappearances—111,000 since records began in 1964. Each of those disappearances is a tragedy. That is absolutely clear to me, as I met the mothers, siblings and relatives of victims when I was in Guadalajara. Our commitment to the promotion of universal human rights is unwavering. We regularly raise our concerns about abuses and levels of impunity with the Mexican Government, at both ministerial and official level. We continue to work with Mexican federal and state governments in support of work to develop the rule of law. For example, we recently supported the development of a new investigation protocol, which is a framework based on UK best practice that sets out how a crime should be investigated. It is in part due to the work of our embassy that that has now been adopted in 32 states in Mexico. That is a great step forward.

The right hon. Member for Islington North mentioned the tragic case of Claudia Uruchurtu, who tragically disappeared in 2021 as she protested against corruption in Oaxaca. The convictions of those involved in her disappearance are a welcome and important step in achieving justice for her and her family, but I say to the right hon. Member that we continue to monitor the case very closely.

I welcome the interest shown by the Mexican Government in holding a bilateral formal human rights dialogue with the UK, which we hope will take place later this year. I discussed that in depth when I met the human rights Minister in May, and we are in close conversation with Mexico on how best to use a dialogue to discuss our shared human rights priorities, both in multilateral forums and bilaterally.

As I mentioned, the UK and Mexico share core values. The quality of our work together was very much in evidence during Mexico's most recent period on the UN Security Council in 2021 and 2022, and our shared voting record of 98% speaks volumes.

We also we celebrate Mexico's work in progressing gender equality globally. Together with the UK, Mexico has been at the forefront in leading that important work. We continue to work closely together in the UN and through excellent projects with the British embassy, such as training for public and private sector organisations on reducing the gender pay gap.

The right hon. Member for Islington North and the hon. Member for West Ham talked about what we are doing more widely in the region, beyond Mexico. All I can say is that I have been enormously privileged over the past 10 months or so to travel to around 22 countries in the Americas. I think that we all agree that the way to build relationships of trust—I know that everyone who has spoken in today's debate is passionate about that, because I observe them to do that in their lives as well—is face to face, not on a screen. I have visited just about every country in central America, with the exception of Nicaragua; I returned from Belize this morning. We want to move things forward in our relationship there through the UK-central America association agreement, and on climate change through the biodiverse landscape fund. There is a positive agenda, and we have a role to play in central America.

I could bore hon. Members for another hour or so about the opportunities for trade in Latin America more widely, but you would not allow me to do that, Mr Gray. There are huge opportunities. The hon. Member for West Ham says that she wants to expand her knowledge about Latin America. Well, she has already pointed out the most important thing, which is that the opportunities to trade there are immense, and we need to encourage more businesses to look at those opportunities and explore them in a meaningful way.

I will conclude by stressing again just how much our relationship with Mexico offers to both our countries; we have a like-minded partner in trade, in the multilateral space, and in our support for a rules-based international system. The UK was the first European power to recognise an independent Mexico—historians will attest to that—and in the 200 years that have followed, our trade, diplomatic and people-to-people links have grown. As our relationship grows, its benefits multiply.

As we look forward to the bicentenary of the relationship between our two remarkable countries, I am sure that hon. Members will agree how exciting it is to see our association and connection with Mexico prospering, and I am sure that they will be as ambitious as I am in wanting to see it continue to prosper over the two centuries ahead.

2.49 pm

Dan Carden: I am delighted that we had the opportunity for this debate and to hear that there is real expertise on Mexico and on the relationship between the UK and Mexico. I thank the hon. Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) for his support over the last few months and engaging with issues in the region. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who has such a fascinating history, as well as a relationship with the current President of Mexico, which, as the Minister graciously said, is such a benefit to the UK and our relationship. I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's attendance today.

I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for her contribution on the special relationship between Scotland and Mexico, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), who was covering today but I think is eager to get to Mexico in the years ahead.

Ms Lyn Brown: Indeed.

Dan Carden: As the Minister said, I was able to visit Mexico last November through the Inter-Parliamentary Union. It was a brilliant visit. We were able to have meetings in the Congress, including in the Senate, and to meet the Mayor of Mexico City, Claudia Sheinbaum, who is now a presidential candidate. We watch her progress with interest. We also went to Oaxaca, which is a beautiful state, and visited Monte Albán, one of the heritage sites that my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North talked about. Those ancient civilisations are a great part of Mexican history.

Mexico is an awe-inspiring country. It has its challenges; there is no doubt that there is a human rights crisis in Mexico, but it offers opportunities for Mexico's allies,

such as us, to work with it. The Minister talked about our ability to share our expertise on the rule of law. I would love to see the Government do more of that with Mexico. I know that if we have a strong developing relationship between the UK and Mexico then we can support it in those areas. We also have a lot to learn from Mexico. Our voting records at the UN show that the values of the British people and the Mexican people—and hopefully its Governments, for a long time to come—are shared. That is why the relationship is one that we can cherish and develop, and one that can be strong going forward.

Let me finish by paying tribute once again to both ambassadors: my friend Jon Benjamin in Mexico City, and Josefa González Blanco, who joins us in the Public Gallery today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the UK's relationship with Mexico.

2.52 pm

Sitting suspended.

Tax-free Shopping for International Visitors

[Dr Rupa Huq *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tax-free shopping for international visitors.

I thank you, Dr Huq, and Mr Speaker very much for granting me this opportunity to bring before the House the important subject of tax-free shopping—both VAT reclaim and duty-free shopping—for international visitors to this country. I also thank my hon. Friend the Minister, to whom I am grateful for turning up on this hot afternoon when I am sure she would much rather be doing something else. I am delighted to have the support of colleagues from throughout the country on this campaign. Of course, this issue affects not only London—it affects London greatly—but cities and tourist hubs across the UK, shopping destinations, cultural venues and the major regional airports.

This is an important debate on an issue I have campaigned on for the past few years following the Government's decision to end tax-free shopping for international visitors when we left the EU. We are now the only major European country that does not have tax-free shopping, and the British economy is missing out as a result. In fact, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation barometer shows that Britain's post-pandemic recovery in visitor numbers is the worst of all major European countries.

It is important at the start of the debate to respond to the idea that such a scheme would not benefit the British people. A study by Oxford Economics showed that restoring tax-free shopping would directly create a staggering 78,000 new jobs up and down the UK, possibly add as much as £4.1 billion to UK GDP, and result in—we believe—a net positive £350 million each year for His Majesty's Treasury. In my speech, I will go into more detail and examine what the data suggests on the opportunities for economic growth from reintroducing tax-free shopping and VAT reclaim for foreign visitors.

Before we review the figures, I make it clear that my sole ask today of my hon. Friend, which I have to say would be almost cost-free, is for the Treasury to commission an independent assessment through the Office for Budget Responsibility or a respected audit firm—so that the Treasury believes it when it gets the results—of the full economic effect of tax-free shopping on the UK figures and all the figures that are available.

I believe the Government's current position is based on inaccurate and incomplete Treasury figures that say that the cost of tax-free shopping would be £2 billion a year in refunded VAT. To highlight briefly how inaccurate those figures are, that calculation was reached by overestimating VAT refunds to UK shoppers by £600 million and excluding any tax revenue from increased spending by extra tourists. I therefore urge the Government to reconsider their objections to tax-free shopping which, as I say, I believe are based on inaccurate figures. We need an independent review to consider the topic so that we do not miss out on what could be a hugely positive and almost instantaneous win for the UK economy.

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

On 31 December 2020, the UK ended its tax-free shopping schemes for non-EU visitors and did not extend the schemes to EU visitors after the UK left the EU. The Government's reasoning for that decision was the estimated cost of extending tax-free shopping to EU residents. Incidentally, all EU countries refund VAT on goods purchased by non-EU visitors—those visitors get the VAT refunded on purchases on the high streets and at duty-free shops in airports. Critically, Britain is therefore now 20% more expensive for shopping than any EU destination.

As we know, the entire economy was badly hit by the covid-19 pandemic and the wide shutdown of society during lockdown. Some of our hardest-hit industries were the tourism, culture and leisure, and hospitality sectors, which, owing to the very nature of their businesses, were unable to adapt easily to the hard lockdown rules, the impact of international restrictions, and reduced travel and tourism.

Now, thankfully, the pandemic is over. We have seen tourists return to the UK to enjoy the cultural sites in London, travel to our other great cities across our great country, and visit our picturesque towns and villages—including tens of thousands of visitors, I am glad to say, to my constituency of the Cotswolds. Sadly, however, our tourist industry recovery has not been as strong as that of some of our European neighbours.

All the real trading data from 2022, as international travel resumed, consistently undermines the Treasury's forecast, which is that tax-free shopping would have little impact on visitor numbers and spending. The actual data on visitor numbers from 2022 and early 2023 show that ending tax-free shopping has had a significant negative impact on the behaviour of international travellers. Many choose to visit the UK, but unfortunately the really high spenders travel to Europe, because it is 20% cheaper to do their luxury goods shopping there.

For example, in 2022, spending by US visitors to the UK was back to pre-2019 pandemic levels, but in France, Spain and Italy it was double. In quarter 1 of 2023, US visitor spending was still just at 2019 levels in the UK, but in France and Spain it was around three times as much as 2019. Unfortunately, the differential is widening. Similarly, spending by Gulf Co-operation Council visitors to the UK in 2022 was around 65% of 2019 levels, whereas in Italy and Spain it was one and a half times the 2019 levels and in France it was double.

Brexit was an opportunity to create change in our economy that truly benefits the UK—creating new opportunities for growth for our innovative and internationally renowned retail, tourism and hospitality sectors. Instead, the EU is enjoying a Brexit bonus at Britain's expense. Unfortunately, we have a double whammy: British shoppers joining other international visitors to shop tax-free in the EU, not in the UK, but not the same level of increased spending here as in other European countries. British shoppers now spend £1 billion on shopping tax-free in the EU, not here. If tax-free shopping was reinstated, Britain would be the only major European economy where 447 million EU residents could shop tax-free, which would create a huge new tourist market. Britain is missing out on a £1 billion Brexit bonus—a real opportunity for Brexit growth.

HMT did not forecast that that many visitors would be diverted completely from visiting the UK in favour of EU destinations. At the Government's request, many businesses submitted actual evidence to HMT, in confidence, on the impact of ending tax-free shopping. The submissions show without a doubt that British businesses have suffered hundreds of millions of pounds in lost sales since 2022, and they see it getting worse, as more and more international travellers realise that they cannot shop tax-free in Britain.

In June 2023, the business improvement district for London's west end, the New West End Company, which my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) knows well, surveyed its member businesses. More than half—54%—said that they were reviewing their long-term capital investment programmes to take account of the fall in the relative performance of their west end stores compared with their stores in continental Europe. More than one fifth—22%—are considering closing their London stores and relocating to mainland Europe. That is an example of how the UK is losing out.

HM Treasury forecasts that allowing 415 million EU residents to shop tax-free in Britain would generate only 50,000 additional trips annually—0.2% of the 24 million EU visitors in 2019. By the same logic, 66 million British residents now being able to shop tax-free in the EU would generate only an additional 9,000 trips. That is simply not credible. The reality is that in 2022 around 48,000 British people claimed VAT refunds in the EU, worth more than half a billion pounds. In 2023, that figure has more than doubled. We estimate that more than 1 million British residents will spend more than £1 billion on tax-free shopping in the EU, but not in the UK. That is one more proof that the Treasury has out-of-date forecasts.

On 3 August, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), I co-signed a letter to the Chancellor highlighting the most recent forecasting report from leading economics consultancy Cebr, the Centre for Economics and Business Research. Its figures were built on an earlier study by Oxford Economics. The two reports were staggering. Cebr forecast additional visitor numbers of between 1.6 million and 1.7 million into this country if the measures were reinstalled, and increased spending of £1.7 billion to £2.8 billion. They each forecast that the GDP of the UK could increase by between £4.1 billion and £9.1 billion annually.

I note that the Treasury forecast is just an extra 50,000 visitors. The slight difference between the data of the Oxford Economics and Cebr forecasts is due to timing, with the former's report released in October 2022 and the latter's published in July 2023. However, we now have real consumer behaviour and spending data. By contrast with the up-to-date findings from Cebr, the Treasury's own figures, on which the Government are making their decisions, come from 2020 estimates. I say to the Minister that the data is quite out of date and so low that it considerably reduces the estimate for visitor numbers and spend.

The Minister recently wrote to me saying that the Government were concerned that the findings of the Oxford Economics study did not match those of the OBR, particularly on the expected number of visitors as a result of introducing tax-free shopping. As I just said, the Oxford Economics forecast is an extra 1.6 million visitors, whereas the OBR forecast is 50,000. However,

the Oxford Economics forecasts are being proved right by the real data from businesses that is now coming in, and the OBR figure is being proved significantly wrong.

All the data coming in clearly shows that the reason why the Treasury does not recognise the figure from Oxford Economics is not because the Oxford Economics forecast is wrong but because the OBR forecast is out of date. The Government are understandably acting on figures from the Treasury that they deem to be reliable. To assess the figures and bring some finality to the debate, I wrote to the OBR in May asking whether it could examine the costings and benefits related to tax-free shopping, both for VAT reclaim and duty-free shopping. Unfortunately, I am yet to receive a full response.

Chinese travellers are the biggest spenders of all, and in the last year Chinese visitors spent $258 billion—almost twice as much as visitors from the USA, who are the second biggest spenders at $135 billion—and they have the biggest potential for growth in the UK. Shopping is their No. 1 priority. Ending tax-free shopping in Britain is closing the door on the most important market for the international visitor economy. From 2009 to 2019, I was heavily involved in growing the number of Chinese visitors to the UK from 130,000 to 800,000, which is almost as many as France has. It was largely due to that increase in high-spending Chinese visitors that overall international spending pre-pandemic increased by 60%, from £17.6 billion to £26.4 billion.

The figures are significant. In 2019, some 800,000 Chinese visitors made up 5% of the 16 million non-EU visitors to the UK, but accounted for a staggering 32% of all tax-free shopping in the UK, spending around £1 billion. Of course, the Chinese were not travelling in 2022 because they were still locked down, but a survey of Chinese who had previously shopped in Europe showed that Britain had dropped from the second favourite European destination in 2019, just below France, to the least popular of all major European countries. In 2022, 75% visited France but only a tiny 42% visited the UK.

The Minister has quite rightly been asking for real evidence on the ground; I will give it to her now. Evidence from Heathrow airport shows that Chinese visitor numbers in July 2023 were at 88% of their 2019 levels, but spending in the shops at Heathrow was at just 33%. The Chinese are coming to the UK, but they are not spending money without the option of VAT reclaim.

There is a common perception that tax-free shopping affects only Oxford Street, Bond Street and the west end; however, this issue affects the whole United Kingdom. That is why the campaign has such wide and growing support, not just from colleagues throughout the country in this House but from major airports, hoteliers, cultural institutions and companies. The amounts spent outside London are significant for local economies—for example, Edinburgh, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and Leeds together accounted for £225 million of tax-free sales in 2019.

The direct impact of all this is on retail sales, but there is also a wider impact on hospitality, culture, leisure and manufacturing. Here is another real example: in its annual report, the Dorchester hotel group reported that its Paris hotel was overperforming and its London one was underperforming as a direct result of the end of tax-free shopping. The Royal Opera House, Shakespeare's Globe, west end theatres and Rank casinos have all publicly criticised the ending of tax-free shopping.

International travellers buy more goods from brands in the countries they are visiting, so British brands such as Mulberry, Burberry and Church's shoes suffer the most. Mulberry has already had to close its flagship Bond Street store, which it blames solely on the end of tax-free shopping. Just imagine that: Mulberry, after all those years on Bond Street, is having to close. That has an impact on its London stores but also on the manufacturing plants and jobs throughout the UK that depend on the shops that are closing. Burberry manufactures in the north-east, Mulberry manufactures in the south-west and Church's shoes manufactures in the east midlands, so support from across the country has been submitted in this campaign, demonstrating the real impact of the removal of tax-free shopping.

Just a few case studies include National Museums Scotland's shop, Essential Edinburgh, Edinburgh Tourism Action Group, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, Marketing Manchester, North West Business Leadership Team and businesses including Johnstons of Elgin, Church & Co, Boodles and Samsonite. The estimated loss of revenue and jobs will affect regional airports as well as manufacturing in factories in Blyth, Yorkshire and Somerset and high-value shopping areas such as Edinburgh, Dundee, London, Manchester and Leeds.

My hon. Friend the Financial Secretary kindly responded to my letter to the Chancellor yesterday to say that the Government are accepting evidence—I welcome that openness and thank her for that—to inform their policymaking on this issue and ensure that the Treasury has the latest data on the impact of the removal of the VAT retail export scheme. I hope that she and other colleagues will find that this debate adds to the compelling case for tax-free shopping for international visitors.

With all the real-world data emerging by the day showing that HMT's forecasts are out of data, we urgently need the independent assessment that I referred to earlier on the full impact of tax-free shopping on the UK economy and its tax revenues. I say this to my hon. Friend the Minister: if an independent assessment shows that the full tax impact is either neutral or net positive, the Government must move quickly to restore tax-free shopping before more damage is done to the UK economy. If such a study proves that the Treasury's figures of £2 billion costs are correct, I will happily accept that and go away and not be a nuisance to her.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): International visitors pay VAT when they stay in hotels, eat in restaurants, drink in bars and go to the theatre, so the independent review must look not just at retail but at the possible VAT revenue that the Treasury would receive if there were more international visitors coming here to shop.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend makes a really good point. This is what the Treasury figures do not cover at the moment. It is not just the VAT reclaimed; it is the VAT paid on all the other items, such as meals in hotels. And it is not just VAT: it is corporation tax, air passenger duty and a range of other duties that will be brought into the Treasury. That is where the figure of £350 million—our estimate—comes from, so my hon. Friend makes a really important point.

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

You will be glad to know I am coming to a conclusion, Dr Huq. The Treasury's figures are based on the wrong methodology that does not consider in full the major upside for the country. I make an urgent plea today to the Financial Secretary. It is time that the OBR or another audit firm did a proper investigation into all the figures, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster said, instead of sticking to the figures that were produced for it in 2020. If it proves that the Treasury figures are correct, so be it. But if, as so many experts and businesses believe, there is considerable economic gain from introducing tax-free shopping, it would be an utter tragedy not to do so. Let us consider the real opportunity for growth and invigorate our economy by introducing tax-free shopping for tourists who come to this country.

3.21 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for securing this important debate. As the Member of Parliament for Cities of London and Westminster, the issue is incredibly important to the economy of my constituency.

International visitors are the lifeblood of so many businesses in areas such as Knightsbridge and the west end, including iconic streets such as Oxford Street, Bond Street and Regent Street. Retail in the two cities accounts for over 4,000 businesses employing approximately 55,000 employees. World famous department stores such as Selfridges and Liberty, as well as the luxury brands along Regent Street and Bond Street, rely on international visitors from China, India, the USA and the middle east. I highlight visitors from those countries and regions because visitors from those areas spend on average 60% more than EU visitors. But of course we are also currently disincentivising visitors from both outside and inside the EU.

Visitors from India and the middle east consistently list shopping as the No. 1 reason for visiting London, according to VisitBritain. Visitors from those areas also state that the tax rate is a consideration when they decide where they wish to travel and how much they are willing to spend when they travel.

I know the Government are committed to supporting retail businesses of all sizes. I thank the Minister for her Department's strong support over the challenging couple of years that we have endured during the pandemic, but now is the time to kickstart the regrowth of our high streets. She will recognise that reintroducing tax-free shopping would be a boost to the businesses that suffered most in the pandemic as their physical stores were forced to shut and tourists were not allowed to travel.

Many of the luxury brands that visitors love to buy in the shops in my constituency have factories based in the United Kingdom, creating skilled jobs and supporting great British manufacturing. For example, Burberry's iconic trench coats are handmade in Castleford in Yorkshire.

As a Conservative, I believe strongly in the growth potential of cutting taxes. Tax-free shopping for international visitors is a perfect example of when cutting a tax rate will increase the total amount of taxable spending. It goes back to the point that I made earlier: when we consider how much tax revenue that international visitors bring in, the issue is not just about shopping. We should take tax away from shopping and allow people to claim back tax on it. They are spending millions, probably billions, of pounds. They probably spend more money on the theatre, restaurants, drinking in our bars and going to other tourist attractions and paying VAT on that. That is why I would ask for an independent review of the whole situation in which we look at VAT and other taxes, including national insurance for the increased number of employees we will have if we want to grow our economy. We want to grow our hospitality sector and our leisure and tourism sector. Those are real jobs. Companies pay corporation tax and employee tax.

I truly believe that re-introducing tax-free shopping will provide a much-needed boost to a wide range of businesses across a number of sectors. This is borne out of new research from Oxford Economics and the Association of International Retail that clearly demonstrates that the tax receipts we will take from these connector sectors will far exceed the revenue lost by offering VAT exemptions on visitor shopping. By offering a VAT exemption, we will reverse the trend we have seen since the abolition of tax-free shopping, where international visitors have been choosing to go to Paris instead. UK international arrivals are down 22% since 2019. The pandemic has obviously had an impact, but France's visitor figures are down by only 12.7%.

I suspect that one of the reasons for the discrepancy is that EU countries still offer tax-free shopping for international visitors. I believe that the French actually improved their tax-free shopping offer for international visitors once we got rid of ours. That shows how important it is to attract visitors into the country—and the French realise this. We know that these visitors are spending less in the UK compared with other European countries. In 2022, spending by visitors in the UK from the US was at 101% of 2019 levels, but in France it was a staggering 226% of 2019 levels. It is obvious that we must do all we can to ensure that London remains the No. 1 destination for international visitors.

Let us not forget that when international visitors come here, they come to London—it is obviously a huge draw to go to the capital city of a country—but they also go elsewhere. They go to Edinburgh, to Inverness to see if they can find Nessie, to York, to Oxford and, of course, to the beautiful Cotswolds. Reintroducing tax-free shopping will lead to more international visitors enjoying the rest of the United Kingdom and the home nations. Since taking away tax-free shopping for international visitors, the number of days that people are coming here for has reduced. People come to London from all over the world, but now, rather than staying for four or five days, they stay for two or three days and then take the Eurostar to Paris to do their shopping. That is what we need to stop. We need to ensure that people come here to enjoy London and the rest of the United Kingdom and to shop here too.

We must reintroduce tax-free shopping. London is one of a small handful of global cities, and I fear that losing tax-free shopping is damaging our reputation as a global city. As my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds mentioned, the Oxford Economics study predicted that by offering tax-free shopping, we could attract more than 1.6 million extra visitors to the UK

every year, stimulating an extra £2.8 billion in tourist spending overall. Think about the tax revenue that we could get from VAT on all the other money they spend here. We must not underestimate the huge impact these extra visitors have on the spending in our wider economy, not just in my constituency but across the United Kingdom. I do believe that it was one of the big attractions when people came here.

The key point is that people do not just spend their money on clothes, or jewellery or watches. They spend money in the restaurants they dine in and in the black cabs they take—I checked earlier, and people have to pay VAT on black cabs, so the cabbies should be supporting our campaign here. People also go to theatres and clubs. They spend money across so many sectors.

I know from speaking to restauranteurs, theatre owners and other stakeholders, such as UKHospitality, that they are all united in wanting tax-free shopping for international visitors to be reinstated. Many of these businesses tell me that they are struggling to get back to their pre-pandemic levels of business and believe that a large part of that is a reduction in foreign visitors, who are preferring to go to Paris or Milan.

The Cities of London and Westminster can be seen as a jigsaw in many ways. The hotels, restaurants, shops, bars, cafés and theatres fit together neatly as an impressive tourist offer. Tax-free shopping has become the missing piece of that jigsaw. If it is returned, it will benefit not just my constituency and retailers, but thousands upon thousands of businesses across this country. That is why I call on the Government to review the whole situation and consider reintroducing tax-free shopping for all international visitors from the EU and outside it.

3.31 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I take this opportunity to sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) not only on securing the debate, but on his persistence on this issue. The first time that he and I spoke at the same time on this issue was in a debate on 10 December 2020. I think he only had three minutes on that particular occasion—it was quite a well-subscribed debate on the future of the high street—so it was a great pleasure to hear him expand those arguments today because I am sorry to say that the essential logic of many of the arguments being made on that day has not changed. In removing tax-free shopping on 1 January 2021, the Treasury seemed to make two key assumptions. The first was that ending tax-free shopping would have no significant impact, or so it thought, on foreign visitor numbers or spend in the UK, whether in terms of choosing to come to the UK or spending once they were in the UK. The second assumption seemed to be that extending tax-free shopping to EU resident visitors would attract few additional visitors to the UK.

There has been lots of logic—not to say economic coherence—missing from some recent budgets, which we are all still paying the price for. However, even taking those Treasury arguments at face value, there is a logical flaw that the presence of tax-free shopping was not always necessarily about attracting additional visitors, although I believe that it does do that, but about not losing them to other areas. The main locations, according to the Treasury, that benefited from it were central London and Bicester Village. It is probably hard to argue with the volume of sales there, but, as has been said, many other locations around the UK benefited too, including many in Scotland. Of course, those were only the areas where sales were recorded, and it does not show the economic activity that otherwise might not have taken place if people had not been attracted here in the first place.

This is of particular significance on a couple of levels to Scotland, but particularly to rural Scotland, where tourism, hospitality, transport and the production of luxury clothing are significant contributors to the local economy. In addition, the whisky and spirit distilling industry is of great significance to not only the locations where it is based and the high-value employment that it creates, but the Treasury's coffers in terms of the overall duties it pays.

We now have data to set against the Treasury's theory, and the results are in. The data appears to indicate that lots of pent-up spend was available. US tourists are spending about the same in the UK in 2022 as they were in 2019. The Treasury says that is a sign of success in terms of tax receipts, but US visitors are now spending three times more in Spain, Italy and France than they were in 2019. The Treasury also forecast that only 50,000 additional EU visitors might be tempted to come to the UK if they could shop tax free, yet 170,000 UK citizens were claiming tax back from the EU in 2022, which is likely to rise to almost 400,000 in the current year. If we take that figure pro rata and apply it to the EU population, that 50,000 would be 2 million in 2023—we are missing out on 40 times the Treasury's forecast in terms of people coming to the UK to spend. That real-life data seems to undermine the forecasts.

The impact is on not only retailers, but hospitality, travel and indigenous producers who manufacture the goods being sold in the first place. The usual reaction of many tourists on getting a VAT rebate is to go and spend it immediately where they are—I find that hard to believe, but who am I to argue with observed human behaviour in the real world? So there would be a double benefit, in that the Treasury would get most of it back. The result would be a double-whammy—not just to the Treasury, but to the retailers and producers of these goods. What we are really doing is simply exporting those sales to other countries; in fact, that seems to be one of the few areas where exports seem to be very much up as a result of the Government's economic policies.

The hon. Member for The Cotswolds described the return of tax-free shopping as a Brexit bonus, but I part company from him there. As with the Windsor framework in Northern Ireland, it would only bring us back to the situation that we were all collectively in prior to Brexit and the Treasury decision. We could still offer tax-free shopping even as part of the European Union; Brexit ought to neither here nor there.

It is not as if the Prime Minister is unaware of the issue; he was still the Chancellor when the decision was taken. But he has certainly had a reminder during his time as Prime Minister. The firm Burberry was mentioned earlier. Gerry Murphy, the chairman of Burberry, was introducing the Prime Minister at a Business Connect event in April this year. He took the opportunity to deliver a few home truths in warning the Prime Minister

[Richard Thomson]

of the somewhat perverse decision to remove VAT refunds, and said that that had hurt the economy. He said that it had

"made the UK the least attractive shopping destination in Europe",

noting that virtually every other major destination still offers VAT refunds and that for Burberry the recovery from the covid-19 pandemic was much stronger in Paris, Milan and Munich—all, like London, prime locations for tourism. He called on the Prime Minister and Chancellor to rethink their spectacular own goal, warning that Brexit was acting in that regard as a drag on growth.

Given that Aberdeen airport is in my constituency, it would be remiss of me not to include a pitch for the impact that the issue has on regional airports. Shopping comprises about 45% on average of the revenues that regional airports take in. That revenue is absolutely vital in keeping airports going and route development for the benefit of the area. Aberdeen is, of course, synonymous with the oil and gas sector, so Aberdeen airport has a strategic importance out of all proportion to the area that it serves simply because of how it serves that location and those key industries.

I speak regularly with management at the airport. Every time I visit, they tell me that they are losing sales hand over fist—to Norway, Spain, the Republic of Ireland and France: all the locations to which Aberdeen has a direct air connection—because of the decision. In actual fact that spend should be taking place, providing employment in my constituency and allowing the airport to develop routes. It should also be allowing us to get an economic benefit that, although not directly connected, is tangentially related to the benefits that come from tax-free shopping, which can allow the economy to develop in so many other areas and enable wider connectivity to Europe and the rest of the world. The policy is very much to the detriment of not only the operation of regional airports such as Aberdeen but the surrounding tourist and business economy.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion, but I say to the Minister that in an earlier exchange this week she undertook to make inquiries about a matter that I raised in the main Chamber. I was very pleased with that response and I hope that, in a similar vein, she will also look very favourably on the very reasonable asks made today by the hon. Member for The Cotswolds to encourage the Treasury to commission research to inform Ministers. That, hopefully, will lead them to a different conclusion about this matter.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): For His Majesty's loyal Opposition, I call the shadow Minister, Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi.

3.40 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) on securing this debate on tax-free shopping for international visitors. On behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition and as a shadow Treasury Minister, I am absolutely thrilled to respond to the debate. I do so for the very first time in my new role as shadow Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, so no doubt hon. Members will be very kind to me today, Dr Huq.

As hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), eloquently made clear, the publication of official independent statistics on this issue commissioned by the Government is long overdue. Manifestly, businesses across our country—although there is a special need for those concentrated close to our airports and in visitor hotspots—need a supportive and stable Government able to provide certainty for the future. Stability and certainty are crucial to enable businesses to plan, invest and grow, but when it comes to tax-free shopping—the arrangement whereby products that are bought here but not consumed here are ultimately VAT-free—the uncomfortable truth for the Government is that Ministers changed course on this policy twice in the space of two months last autumn.

The Prime Minister, when he was the Chancellor, ended VAT-free shopping for tourists in 2021. The right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), who became Chancellor, promised in September 2022 to reinstate it, as part of his disastrous mini-Budget. Weeks later, as the musical chairs to become Chancellor continued, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) came in as Chancellor and performed another U-turn: tax-free shopping was again off the table. No sooner had one Conservative Chancellor marched businesses all the way to the top of the hill than the next one marched them all the way back down again. The country will not forget the worry and pain that began nearly one year ago with a Tory mini-Budget that crashed our economy, led to interest rates rising, and caused lasting damage for households and businesses. The reversal of the disastrous mini-Budget was necessary, of course, but businesses affected by the U-turn have been left understandably frustrated by changes and decisions made in haste.

We in the Opposition have been listening carefully to the concerns of those calling for VAT-free shopping to be reinstated, but at a time when the nation is having to navigate its way through multiple Tory Government-induced crises, we do not believe that reinstating tax-free shopping for international visitors should be a priority for the use of the billions of pounds of public money. Nevertheless, although we are not calling for VAT-free shopping to be reinstated, we firmly believe that retail and hospitality businesses, particularly those concentrated on our high streets, need support from the Government.

That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the shadow Chancellor, has set out, Labour is committed to reviving Britain's high streets by replacing the current system of business rates with a new and reformed system that is fit for the modern day. Businesses on our high street provide essential services to people across the country and make a significant contribution to the Exchequer. They are not just places to buy things we need, but an important part of where we live, work and go about our daily lives. Their success is a key part of our mission to secure for the UK the highest sustained economic growth in the G7.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I thank the shadow Exchequer Secretary for giving way. I did not realise he had just been promoted, so I congratulate him on his new post. For understandable reasons, he is not committing

to restore tourist tax-free shopping, but would he support my plea to the Minister that we should have a proper independent examination of all the figures to prove whether it would be a tax benefit, neutral or negative for this country, so that we can make informed decisions?

Mr Dhesi: As I mentioned earlier, it is imperative that those official, independent and highly regarded statistics commissioned by the Government are there for all to see, for the sake of transparency. However, we feel that at a time when we have the highest recorded waiting lists for the NHS, the biggest tax burden and drop in disposable income since the second world war, and many other crises besides, this cannot be a priority for what I hope will be the incoming Labour Government—touch wood.

We will support businesses, create jobs and increase productivity across every part of our country. A Labour Government will keep listening to and working with businesses as we set about making the tax system fairer and providing the stability and certainty that businesses so desperately need.

3.47 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. It is the first time I have done so, and I am delighted to be chaired so well.

I welcome the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) to his place. It is a pleasure to see him there and I look forward to our doing battle over the Dispatch Box in the coming months. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for securing today's discussion. He is an assiduous advocate on the issue, and his speech showed the great care and thought that he has put into it. I genuinely thank him for his speech, as I do my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken); I will be dealing with some of her points later.

I hope the House will forgive me if I start with some points of clarification. I have said in this Chamber before that in the very complex world of tax law, VAT is the most complicated area; it is also the most litigious. When the Treasury or His Majesty's Revenue and Customs faces litigation on VAT rules and their interpretation, the organisation can often bear millions of pounds of risk on behalf of the taxpayer on a single word in a piece of legislation. That is why I am going to be very particular about the terminology. I am conscious that lots of people will be paying great interest, and it is important that we get the terminology right.

The phrase VAT-free shopping can be used in the context of this debate, but for the avoidance of doubt, for those acts of shopping by tourists there will often be taxes and duties payable on their purchases on their return to their home country. We are focusing on what is actually called the VAT retail export scheme—VAT RES for short. I note that airside tax-free shopping is also in scope, but it has not been raised so I will not trouble the House with it. VAT RES is still available for all non-UK visitors who purchase items in store and have them delivered to their overseas address, which many shoppers would rather do than have to take them all home in their luggage. It also applies to overseas shoppers who buy online and have items delivered, so they can support British businesses from far afield.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I anticipated that my hon. Friend would raise that—in fact, I nearly put it in my speech to stop her doing so. The proportion of people who want to reclaim the tax and have goods delivered—let us think of, say, a Chinese person visiting this country—is minute compared with the proportion who shop in this country and then physically reclaim the VAT and go home. So while that scheme is available, it is very little used.

Victoria Atkins: In fairness, it may be that people do not know that it is available. I do not know whether shops or brands advertise it to their customers. If a consumer is buying a larger item, they may think it much more convenient to have it sent home. The scheme is available should shoppers wish to make the savings described in the debate.

I acknowledge this has not been the case today, but some people call the current situation a "tourist tax". Again, that is not correct, because the change in the law that happened a couple of years ago means that we simply expect overseas tourists to pay the same amount of tax as British people do when making a purchase, especially when so many countries—including some of the alternative shopping destinations that can be mentioned—do impose a genuine tourist tax on their visitors. So please let us not refer to it in that way, because that would not be correct.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds understandably referred to a 20% saving from such VAT refunds, but that assumes that shoppers receive all the VAT back. In reality, we know that the companies processing refunds, who are sometimes the retailers themselves, charge significant administrative fees for the service. Indeed, one third of VAT RES users surveyed by HMRC were charged more than 50% of their refund in fees, and the average was 36%, so the savings to the consumer may be far less than the 20% rate of VAT.

To try to set in context the environment in which I am considering this request—alongside many others—since we voted to leave the European Union in 2016, the Treasury has received some £50 billion-worth of helpful suggestions and requests for products or items that should be zero-rated or have VAT relief applied to them. Cases are made in different debates on different subject matters where we are asked to make VAT relief decisions. Of course, VAT remains our third most productive tax in the UK, and it helps to support many of the public services that we all care so deeply about. Those are serious considerations that we must take into account for any request for VAT relief that we receive.

I completely understand the intentions behind my hon. Friend's work—indeed, I commend him on it—and I share his wish to ensure that the UK remains an attractive place to visit and that support for our retail sector and high streets is strengthened. Both intentions and aspirations are shared across the Government. Therefore, if I may, I will take a couple of moments to help the House understand what we have done to achieve exactly that.

Through VisitBritain and the GREAT campaign, we have invested significantly in marketing the UK both domestically and internationally to stimulate demand and support recovery. According to updated forecasts from VisitBritain, there are due to be 37.5 million visits to the UK this year, which is some 92% of the level seen

[Victoria Atkins]

in 2019 before the pandemic, and inbound visitor spending is forecast to be £30.9 billion, which is up 9%. Those updates follow the stronger recovery we are seeing, with spending by American visitors up 42% to a record £6 billion last year alone. Sadly, international visitor numbers are still below 2019 levels for all G7 members and large European countries in 2022 and 2023, but of course that comes against the backdrop of the UK economy doing much better than was forecast over the last year or so, as we saw really encouraging growth figures more generally for the economy last week. Rather than ours being the weakest post-pandemic recovery in terms of visitor numbers, the post-pandemic recovery in the UK has been stronger than in countries, such as Germany and Japan, that continued to offer VAT RES. Post-pandemic recovery in the UK has also been stronger than in the United States and Canada in both 2022 and 2023.

We want to make sure that the tourist experience in the UK is as great as it can possibly be. One of the ways in which we have tried to reduce the bureaucracy and the barriers for tourists coming into the UK is by creating an exemption from visa requirements through our new electronic travel authorisation scheme to boost international tourism numbers, with visitors from the Gulf Co-operation Council states and Jordan being the first to benefit. We have also worked with industry to set up the tourism industry working group on international competitiveness and demand, which has been established to recommend practical policy options to support tourism recovery.

Nickie Aiken: I was interested to hear about that new collection of people working together to improve the tourist offer. If that group recommended that VAT RES be reintroduced to help the growth of tourism, would the Treasury be minded to accept that recommendation?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend will know that that group will not necessarily have access—in fact, I would be surprised if it did—to the macroeconomic data that the Treasury, the OBR and others, including the retail industry itself, have. We understand that every decision we make will be scrutinised in due course by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility, so there are processes that we have to go through. As I have said, however, and as I will repeat in this speech, we are very keen to hear evidence and data from the retail sector. We very much keep this policy under review.

In respect of high streets, it is argued that the reintroduction of the VAT RES scheme would be a useful move to support our world-leading retailers. This Government are proud to have provided huge support to the retail sector, not least through the extreme challenges that that sector faced during the pandemic. Hon. Members will recall the measures that we took to ensure that the sector paid no business rates—support that was worth £16 billion to businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors throughout the pandemic—as well as the very practical support measures such as the furlough scheme, bounce back loans and even small business grants for the smaller businesses in our communities, all of which helped to secure and safeguard millions of jobs across the UK economy and keep businesses surviving through that very difficult time. We would argue that that support helped to keep our high streets, our retail centres and our communities thriving.

We clearly recognise the importance of retailers and will continue to act effectively to support them. At autumn statement 2022, the Government announced business rate changes and tax cuts worth more than £13.5 billion over the next five years, which will support the retail, tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors, as well as other parts of the economy. These announcements included a freeze to the business rates multiplier for 2023-24, which is a tax cut worth £9.3 billion over the next five years, meaning that all bills are 6% lower than without the freeze.

We also introduced an Exchequer-funded transitional relief scheme, which many sectors had asked for and which is worth £1.6 billion, to protect an estimated 700,000 ratepayers facing bill increases due to the increases in rateable value. Indeed, I have had the pleasure of visiting that great British company John Lewis, on Oxford Street, to see for myself the positive impact that these and other changes have had on that really important British business.

Nickie Aiken: I thank the Minister for giving way yet again. I am interested in what she says about a great British company such as John Lewis, which is based in my constituency, and its flagship branch in Oxford Street, which is also in my constituency. Does she agree that, if we are to encourage people back to places such as Oxford Street—the nation's high street—those places have to have a great offering? They have to look good, be clean and have brilliant shops, and not so many of the candy stores and that type of retail offer, which we seem to have at the moment and which is really disappointing. Also, the Mayor of London has a huge role to play in ensuring that there is a tourism offer, and the current Mayor is letting down London.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. May I just say that we are straying from the subject matter, which is tax-free shopping? Also, when you say "you," that means me. I did not do anything—it is "the Minister".

Victoria Atkins: I hope to ingeniously incorporate VAT RES into my response to my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right that, although the advocates of the scheme place a great deal of emphasis on it as a tax lever to encourage tourists back to the United Kingdom, in reality tourists come to the UK to look at our beautiful architecture, visit theatres, visit wonderful historic locations, and—dare I say it—visit the Lincolnshire wolds and other places of great beauty around the country.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The Cotswolds.

Victoria Atkins: Including, of course, the Cotswolds. We must look not just at how to encourage more tourism through tax levers, but at the actual offering to tourists when they are here in Oxford Street, Burford or Bourton-on-the-Water, so we ensure that those places are as attractive and inviting as they can possibly be. I hope that the House is therefore in no doubt that the Government are determined to do everything they can to make the UK an attractive place to visit, both to support tourism and hospitality and to support our retailers.

As I have said, the VAT retail export scheme is still available to those non-UK visitors who purchase items in store or online and have them delivered to their overseas address. However, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds, a significant Treasury analysis in 2022 estimated that introducing worldwide VAT RES shopping would come at a fiscal cost of around £2 billion each year. I know that my hon. Friends and others have questioned that analysis and methodology, and I will try to address some of those queries and concerns. We also know that industry-commissioned analyses have reached different conclusions, including the Oxford Economics report, which I have gone through carefully with officials. I will try to break some of those down.

The Treasury costings include estimates for an increase in the numbers, but it does not agree that as many extra visitors would come to the UK as a result of changing the tax measure, as suggested by the external research that we have seen so far, particularly the Oxford Economics analysis. For example, the Government estimate that 50,000 to 80,000 more people would come to the UK if we introduced such a scheme. My hon. Friend thinks the figure would be higher, and I think the Oxford Economics report suggested something in the region of 1.6 million, but the 50,000 to 80,000 figure has been endorsed by the OBR, which is the independent body that scrutinises Treasury calculations and assumptions. Indeed, my hon. Friend has asked the OBR to review the policy.

The figure of 50,000 to 80,000 extra visitors is just 4% of that suggested by Oxford Economics, which suggested that 1.6 million more people would come every year. To put that in context, the total number of tourists we welcomed in 2019 was just over 40 million. We therefore find the external assumption to be much stronger than the Treasury was able to find evidence for.

Let me try to reassure observers about the Treasury's methodology. I know that the concern is raised that it does not properly account for an increase in visitors. I reiterate that the fiscal cost of £2 billion was made up not just of that factor, but of many other components. For example, the cost includes the VAT loss on purchases from EU and non-EU visitors. The cost also takes account of changes in behaviour. It includes an adjustment for the changes in the number of visitors, the changing spending patterns of visitors and the impact of digitalising a VAT RES scheme.

It is also said that the costings overestimate VAT refunds to EU shoppers, but, in fact, EU visitor spending is adjusted to account for the fact that these visitors tend to spend less than non-EU visitors. Government analysis assumed that EU visitors would spend at about 60% of non-EU levels, but, for comparison, Oxford Economics used 63%, so the Government's assumption was in fact more generous.

Even taking into account those effects, the Government still estimate that the measure would cost in the region of £2 billion each year, and the methodology for calculating that £2 billion cost is consistent with the methodology signed off and certified by the OBR in 2020.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster emphasised, tourism must be seen in the round. We should be confident that the UK's attraction as a destination extends well beyond our shopping, even though we have pretty brilliant shops in our great city and around the country. Evidence from VisitBritain shows that the key motivators for tourists visiting the UK are our rich history and heritage and our vibrant towns and cities, not just shopping.

HMRC has surveyed VAT RES users and found that VAT RES did not make the list of reasons for visiting Great Britain. Furthermore, two thirds of those surveyed said that they would have purchased the items regardless of the scheme, while 28% would have purchased fewer items, meaning that 95% of tourists would still shop even without the scheme.

To emphasise that point, I have asked officials for figures on how much tourists spend when they are visiting. I am told that the average spend per visit was £696 in 2019 and £848 in 2022, which is an increase of 8% in real terms. That tends to indicate that international spending habits in the UK are not directly informed by whether VAT RES is in place.

I accept, of course, that individuals will make different decisions on VAT, and that some customers are more price-sensitive than others. However, taken in the round, those are the figures with which I have been provided. We have looked at the Treasury's analysis and the OBR's analysis, which suggest that the increase in tourist spending is marginal, but the policy would still come with a significant price tag.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds advocates for a review. As with all taxes, the Government keep VAT policy under constant review. Further to that, we have committed to understanding the latest evidence on VAT shopping, or on the impact of the VAT RES scheme on shopping in British high streets. That is why the Chancellor has already invited evidence submissions from industry to inform our policy making.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the retail and hospitality industry for providing so much data already for my officials. I am obviously keen for them to carry on with their businesses—earning money, making profits, employing people and contributing to our growing economy. I am grateful to them for taking the trouble and time to help us with this. We expect further evidence in the coming weeks, which we look forward to receiving and will consider very carefully.

Although I am obliged to stress that the independent OBR certified the Government's costings for the removal of the VAT RES scheme and that we have set out our methodology for how the £2 billion estimate was calculated, I have heard my hon. Friend's call for an independent review and I will reflect carefully on his eloquent submissions.

We are committed to ensuring that the UK remains an attractive place to visit and committed to supporting our retail sector. None the less, the Chancellor is clear that being responsible with the public finances is a key priority. In that regard, VAT RES would subsidise a large amount of tourist spending that already occurs, arguably, without a tax relief in place. But we very much want to listen to industry and support long-term sustainable growth, so we will continue, as I say, to receive evidence and keep the policy under review. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for setting this debate in motion.

4.11 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to you, Dr Huq, for giving me the opportunity to briefly reply to this debate; it is very important. I thank the Minister

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

for setting out in detail for the first time how the Treasury's methodology works. I will come back to that in a minute. Before she did so, she set out in detail the reliefs that the Treasury has given to businesses in rates and VAT, as well as high street grants and business grants during the dreadful pandemic, all of which were very much appreciated by businesses and no doubt kept a lot of them going. Some of those reliefs still persist today, for which I am sure businesses are grateful. But that is no substitute for businesses getting profits into their bottom line, and one way of doing that is to get more tourists into this country spending more money. That is why I think the issue is so important.

The Minister has fully set out the case for why she believes the Treasury's methodology relating to the £2 billion cost to the Treasury is correct. I suggest that I take that away and ask industry to go through, in depth, all the things that she has mentioned and come up with a statement on whether they agree on each individual point, and if not, why they disagree and what the effect would be. If, at the end of the day, we still disagree with the Treasury's methodology, may I come back to her with a comprehensive statement and discuss it further? I would still say that we badly need an independent study.

I have not brought my brief today, but I recall that when the OBR addressed the Treasury Committee, it said that it placed low reliance—I think that is what it said—on the visitor number forecasts.

Victoria Atkins: I was anticipating this point and, indeed, quizzed my officials about it. I think the phrase my hon. Friend refers to is a high uncertainty rating. I am told that that rating given by the OBR is not unusual in the context of Government policy. That is because it is driven by behavioural uncertainty, which is difficult to predict with limited data and the additional complexity linked to EU exit. It was not, I am told, because of concerns with the methodology employed. As I say, we are very keen to hear further evidence and views in due course.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being so well informed to be able to answer that individual point. However, I suspect, again, that industry and the OBR will disagree with her over that matter.

I thank the Minister very much, and you, Dr Huq, for so ably chairing this debate. It has been thoroughly useful. The fact that we have had relatively few speakers has enabled us to examine the whole issue in detail; I think industry will be very grateful for that. I suspect that it will come back with all sorts of replies that will rebut what my hon. Friend has said. Let us see and then I will go back to her and I am sure the debate will continue. Nevertheless, I thank her very much for what she has done this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered tax-free shopping for international visitors.

4.15 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 7 September 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Business and Trade update

The Minister for International Trade (Nigel Huddleston): Since Parliament adjourned for summer recess, the Department for Business and Trade has been carrying out a significant amount of activity in a number of areas. We are updating the House today on progress in these areas.

UK-India trade negotiations

The 11th round of UK-India free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations began on 5 July and concluded on 14 July in London. The 12th round of talks took place in Delhi from 8-31 August. Both rounds were conducted in a hybrid fashion.

During round 11, India's Minister for Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal, visited London. Discussions covered the status of the negotiations, as well as wider trade and investment opportunities for the UK and India. Shri Sunil Barthwal, India's Commerce Secretary, also visited the UK during the round to meet with senior UK trade officials and take stock of progress made in the round.

During round 12, between 24-26 August, the Secretary of State visited India to attend the final trade and investment working group of the Indian G20 Presidency. During her visit, she again met with Minister Goyal. Their discussions focused on goods, services and investment. We agreed to hold round 13 in September.

UK-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) trade negotiations

The fourth round of UK-Gulf Cooperation Council free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations began on 17 July and concluded on 28 July in London. The round was held in a hybrid fashion.

Technical discussions were held across 23 policy areas over 44 sessions. Good progress was made and both sides remain committed to securing an ambitious, comprehensive and modern agreement fit for the 21st century.

UK-Israel trade negotiations

The third round of United Kingdom-Israel free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations began week commencing 23 July. The round was held in a hybrid fashion—UK officials travelled to Jerusalem for negotiations and others attended virtually.

We focused primarily on trade in services and procurement, which are key areas not covered by our current trading arrangements under the trade and continuity partnership agreement. Negotiators held text-based and technical discussions across 10 policy areas and 32 sessions in Jerusalem. Both sides continue to work towards an upgraded modern agreement and the fourth round of negotiations will take place in due course.

Smarter regulations

We intend to introduce legislation to further extend recognition of the CE mark in Great Britain for regulations managed by the Department for Business and Trade when parliamentary time allows.

Government have engaged extensively with industry to understand concerns about the requirement to use the UKCA mark on many products from December 2024. We have heard that the planned transition to UKCA poses challenges and costs for businesses. We have listened and we are taking action.

Businesses will have the flexibility and choice to use either the UKCA mark or the EU's CE mark to place goods on the GB market. This approach is designed to minimise additional regulatory compliance costs for businesses while ensuring consumers can continue to access safe products. We will engage with industry to develop our proposed approach to product markings and CE recognition in a way that benefits both British businesses and consumers.

Departmental responsibility transfer update

Following machinery of Government changes, responsibility for the pre-existing provision for covid loan guarantees and the pre-existing Post Office working capital facility has transferred from the former Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to the Department for Business and Trade.

Following review, it has been noted that at the Department for Business and Trade's main estimate for 2023-24 Government officials did not include the cash required to meet payments for these pre-existing arrangements. Parliamentary approval for additional cash of £3,659,625,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Department for Business and Trade. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £3,659,625,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund. The cash advance will be repaid upon receiving Royal Assent on the Supply and Appropriation Bill.

Shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme (SCGS)

Today the Secretary of State is laying a departmental minute describing a contingent liability arising from the launch of a shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme (SCGS) before Parliament.

The scheme is a finance instrument which will provide guarantees to banks in respect of loans made to vessel owners and operators seeking to place orders at UK shipyards. The shipbuilding credit guarantee scheme (SCGS) will guarantee a portion of the value of eligible loans, sharing the risk with lenders to encourage offers of finance to UK vessel owners and operators.

The SCGS is one of a number of targeted interventions being taken as part of over £4 billion of Government investment planned through the Government's national shipbuilding strategy refresh, to encourage UK ship owners and operators to place new orders and upgrade their existing fleets with world-leading shipyards that are based up and down the UK. HM Treasury has approved the arrangements.

[HCWS1010]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

"A Sustainable Future—Reforming Club Football Governance": Consultation Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): I wish to inform the House that the Government have today published our

response to the White Paper consultation "A Sustainable Future – Reforming Club Football Governance: Consultation Response".

Football lies at the heart of our nation and it touches the lives of so many of us across the country. Football brings people together, whether at times of national sporting success, or through football clubs that form a vital part of our lives not just for fans, but for their local communities too. Football fosters a sense of belonging and supports local economies.

As the Government set out in the White Paper, "A Sustainable Future - Reforming Club Football Governance", although English football is an undeniable global success story that should be celebrated, protected and promoted, there are long-standing issues in the game. The football pyramid is a huge asset of this country, but unfortunately some clubs have been run in financially unsustainable ways.

This consultation response is the latest step in the Government's ongoing commitment to support, promote and protect the national game, as well as ensure that fans are placed at the heart of it. This began with the Government's 2019 manifesto commitment to an independent fan-led review, which was then carried out in 2021. The Government are extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), the chair of the review, for her comprehensive work. This ultimately led us to publish our White Paper in February 2023, which built on the review's recommendations and set out a comprehensive plan to introduce an independent regulator for English football clubs.

This regulator will have a primary strategic purpose of ensuring that English football is sustainable and resilient, for the benefit of fans and the local communities they serve. This will help to protect our national game, build secure foundations for clubs and ensure fans are always in their rightful place at the heart of football.

Since publishing the White Paper, the Government have undertaken significant engagement with a broad range of stakeholders. This has included regular meetings with the Premier League, English Football League (EFL), the Football Association (FA), the National League and the Football Supporters' Association (FSA), as well as official and ministerial-level meetings with over 40 football clubs. In addition, the Government have held a series of meetings with leading experts across a variety of fields, including economics, finance, regulation and law. The Government have also received detailed written responses from over 70 key stakeholders including the Premier League and EFL (and a number of their constituent clubs), the FA, the FSA and contributions from industry and legal experts as well as other footballing bodies, including Fair Game, Kick It Out, the Players Football Association (PFA) and Level Playing Field.

I want to thank all the fan groups, clubs, leagues, football bodies and industry experts who have engaged with the Government throughout the entire process, providing their feedback and views on key aspects of the Government's policy proposals, including financial regulation, corporate governance, financial distributions and fan engagement. I would also like to thank the academics Kieran Maguire and Dr Christina Philippou for their independent, expert analysis of financial sustainability in football. I have personally met with a number of clubs, football authorities and fan organisations to listen to their views and understand how the Government can best achieve our shared goal of a successful, sustainable English game. Across the board, this engagement has been very constructive and has helped the Government to further develop and fine-tune our policy proposals.

The document the Government are publishing today summarises some of the key themes arising out of this ongoing consultation and sets out this Government's response. This includes topics such as: the case for reform; the scope of the regulator; consistency of the regulatory approach; the independence of the regulator; managing the regulatory landscape; and the regulatory backstop powers on distributions. Furthermore, the document sets out that the Government are currently minded to set up a new independent body to house the regulator; however, all options remain under review.

The Government will continue to work with and engage industry and fan groups as these proposals develop. English football is a £6 billion industry with a unique market structure and complex commercial dynamics. As such, it is crucial that the Government take the necessary time to work closely with key stakeholders to design a bespoke regulatory model that allows for a flexible, agile and proportionate approach. This Government's approach will seek to minimise the risk of regulatory overlap and burden, by collaborating and sharing information with existing football bodies, which could include co-ordinating rules and processes with industry bodies to minimise gaps, duplication or conflicts. This will balance the need for change to secure the long-term future of our national game and the need to restore fans' place at its heart with the importance of ensuring continued global success.

The Government are working at pace to deliver and remain committed to legislating to put the independent football regulator on a statutory footing as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I am confident that our White Paper proposals will put football on a more sustainable course for the future, and the Government remain fully committed to working with fans and the wider football community to make them a reality.

[HCWS1007]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Full Chain Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage project: Development Consent

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by Net Zero Teesside Power Ltd and Net Zero North Sea Storage Ltd for development consent for a full chain carbon capture, usage and storage project, which includes a new gas-fired electricity generating station with post-combustion carbon capture plant, gas, electricity and water connections and a CO_2 pipeline network, located on Teesside.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a

new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the net zero Teesside project is 14 September 2023.

The Secretary of State requested further information to be supplied by the applicants Net Zero Teesside Power Ltd and Net Zero North Sea Storage Ltd by 30 May. The applicants submitted this information on 4 August. The Secretary of State has, therefore, decided to set a new deadline of no later than 16 November 2023 for deciding this application, to enable my Department to ensure sufficient time to consider this information and to conduct the necessary consultations with interested parties.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decisions on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS1008]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Rules: Statement of Changes

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a Statement of Changes in Immigration Rules.

EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) and EUSS family permits

We are making certain changes to the EUSS, which enables EU, other European Economic Area (EEA) and Swiss citizens living in the UK by the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020, and their family members, to obtain immigration status.

The effect of the changes is the removal of the right of administrative review for EUSS eligibility refusals and relevant cancellation decisions made on or after 5 October 2023. In line with the Citizens' Rights Agreements, a right of redress will continue to be provided through a right of appeal. The changes create streamlined arrangements for challenging a decision and align with the approach taken in the rest of the immigration system (where no dual right of redress exists).

The same changes apply to the S2 Healthcare Visitor route, which provides a route of entry to the UK for people who, before the end of the transition period, had requested authorisation from their EEA home state or Switzerland to receive a course of planned healthcare treatment provided by the NHS under the "S2 arrangement".

We are also making some minor, technical amendments to Appendix EU for clarification purposes.

Immigration Rules for Pre-1997 Gurkhas, Hong Kong Military Unit Veterans and Family Members

We are bringing the pre-1997 Gurkha settlement concession into the Immigration Rules and at the same time extending the policy to cover pre-1997 members of Hong Kong military units as announced in March 2023.

The policy recognises Hong Kong veterans have similar circumstances to Gurkhas, stationed in Hong Kong prior to handover to China, although never based in the UK. It will enable those eligible who were discharged before 1 July 1997 to settle in the UK. This will be done by extending the provisions of the settlement concession that already exists for former Gurkhas and their families to Hong Kong military unit veterans and their families. Bringing both cohorts under the rules provides greater transparency for these routes and fairness of treatment.

Changes to Appendix Electronic Travel Authorisation

We have made changes to clarify that the ETA exemption for applicants lawfully resident in Ireland who are travelling within the Common Travel Area will require a person aged 16 or above to demonstrate residency in Ireland, if required by a UK official, in order to benefit from this exemption.

The changes to the Immigration Rules are being laid on 7 September 2023.

All changes in the Statement of Changes will come into effect on various dates from 28 September 2023.

[HCWS1009]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

UK Science update

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Michelle Donelan): The Government have successfully concluded negotiations with the European Union regarding the UK's participation in EU science and research programmes; Horizon Europe and Copernicus.

From today, UK scientists can bid and participate confidently in the world's largest programme of research co-operation—alongside their EU, Norwegian, New Zealand and Israeli colleagues—and with countries like Korea and Canada looking to join.

UK academics and industry will be able to bid, secure funding for, and, crucially, lead, the vast majority of new calls that will be opening throughout the autumn. UK researchers and businesses can be certain that all successful UK applicants will be covered through the UK's association for the rest of the programme, or through the remainder of the UK's Horizon Europe guarantee scheme as we transition to these new arrangements. All calls in Work Programme 2024 will be covered by association and the UK guarantee scheme will be extended to cover all calls under Work Programme 2023. UK scientists and researchers can lead project consortia under Work Programme 2024—a key ask of the sector—allowing them to shape the next generation of international collaboration.

Under the previous programme the UK established over 200,000 collaborative links, and we will now play a leading role in a range of ground-breaking industry collaborations such as the Al, Data and Robotics Partnership worth over £2 billion, or the Cancer Mission aiming to help more than 3 million people by 2030.

Access to Horizon Europe was a top ask of our research community. We have listened to our sector and in this deal delivered collaboration where it is most valuable to UK science. This provides our scientists with a stable base for international collaboration and makes sure we are on track to deliver on the ambition to make the UK a science and technology superpower by 2030.

The Government have negotiated a bespoke deal in the UK's national interest. It strengthens UK science, boosts economic growth and delivers for the UK taxpayer. This bespoke deal works for the UK by ensuring that we do not pay for the time we were not associated. It also delivers a new mechanism protecting our taxpayers in case the UK ends up putting significantly more into the pot than our scientists get out. This deal also means that the UK has a greater ability to overperform than other associated countries outside the EU/ EEA reflecting our confidence in UK science.

We will also associate to the Copernicus programme, a state-of-the art capacity to monitor the Earth, and to its services. The UK's association to Copernicus comes at a crucial moment, where the Copernicus space infrastructure and its information services will evolve further and our contribution to understanding and acting on environmental and climate change related challenges is more important than ever. Access to this unique Earth observation data will provide early warning of floods and fires and allow the UK's world-leading sector to bid for contracts worth over hundreds of millions. And the UK will have cost-free access to the EU Space Surveillance and Tracking services, providing important information about objects in space.

The UK will not join the Euratom programme. The UK fusion sector has communicated a preference for an alternatives programme that would involve direct investment in the UK sector. We are pleased to announce that we will be doing exactly that. We plan to invest up to £650 million to 2027 in a programme of new, cutting-edge alternative programmes subject to business cases, and will announce further details shortly.

[HCWS1006]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 7 September 2023

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Bill [*Lords*]

The following is an extract from Report stage of the Energy Bill on Tuesday 5 September 2023:

Andrew Bowie: The United Kingdom already has a great story to tell on reducing our carbon emissions. We have reduced our emissions faster than any other G7 nation. We were the first European nation to legislate for net zero. We have the first oil and gas basin dedicated to going net zero and the first, second, third and fourth-largest offshore wind farms in the world operating and generating power off the coast of Great Britain right now. We have eliminated our reliance on coal. We have grown to more than 40% of energy being generated by renewables. We have announced further investment in carbon capture, usage and storage, and we are pressing ahead with Great British Nuclear, which I launched two months ago with an exciting programme for small modular reactors. We are on track to deliver 24 GW of nuclear power on the grid by 2025.

[Official Report, 5 September 2023, Vol. 737, c. 274.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie):

An error has been identified in my speech on the Energy Bill. The correct information is as follows:

Andrew Bowie: The United Kingdom already has a great story to tell on reducing our carbon emissions. We have reduced our emissions faster than any other G7 nation. We were the first European nation to legislate for net zero. We have the first oil and gas basin dedicated to going net zero and the first, second, third and fourth-largest offshore wind farms in the world operating and generating power off the coast of Great Britain right now. We have eliminated our reliance on coal. We have grown to more than 40% of energy being generated by renewables. We have announced further investment in carbon capture, usage and storage, and we are pressing ahead with Great British Nuclear, which I launched two months ago with an exciting programme for small modular reactors. We are on track to deliver 24 GW of nuclear power on the grid by **2050**.

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