

**Wednesday  
18 October 2023**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 18 October 2023**

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# House of Commons

Wednesday 18 October 2023

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

#### Crime Prevention

1. **Anna McMorrin** (Cardiff North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help prevent crime in Wales. [906594]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** The Government are committed to investing in our police to drive down crime across Wales. That includes an extra 1,127 police officers for Welsh forces under the police uplift programme. Approximately £9 million has been allocated to Welsh forces through the safer streets fund, targeting neighbourhood crime, violence against women and girls, and antisocial behaviour.

**Anna McMorrin:** Antisocial behaviour has a devastating impact on communities across Wales and in Cardiff North. My constituent, Sarah, suffered a miscarriage due to the stress of repeated antisocial behaviour. She was not entitled to any support, because this Government consider those who suffer from antisocial behaviour to be second-class victims. My amendment to change that in the Victims and Prisoners Bill was rejected by this Government. How can they claim to prevent crime while failing to support victims?

**David T. C. Davies:** I assure the hon. Lady that victims of antisocial behaviour are as much victims of crime as anyone else. I absolutely stand with victims of antisocial behaviour; it is a matter that we take very seriously indeed. I have not seen the amendment tabled by the hon. Lady, but she must be aware that this Government have brought in longer prison sentences for the most serious crimes, and made it easier for the police to arrest people carrying out crime—matters that the Labour party has voted against.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The chief constable of Dyfed–Powys police recently told the Welsh Affairs Committee that Dyfed–Powys police force now has more police officers than at any time in its history, following the UK Government's decision to invest in more officers and increase the local number of officers by 154. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Dyfed–Powys police force on reaching

that milestone, and on all the hard work it does in helping to make Pembrokeshire one of the safest parts of the country?

**David T. C. Davies:** My right hon. Friend will be as pleased as I am that the Government have delivered on their 2019 manifesto commitment to recruit 20,000 extra police officers, and I commend the work of police officers in Dyfed–Powys police. I had the privilege and honour to go to one of the passing out ceremonies recently, and I commend the work that it does.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State for Wales.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is not just antisocial behaviour that is wreaking havoc across Wales. Shoplifting in Wales is also soaring, and in the year to March 2023 it was up by 31%. Why will the Secretary of State's Government not adopt Labour's plan to scrap the minimum £200-worth of stolen goods rule, which was introduced by his Government in 2014 and allows gangs of shoplifters to escape punishment and puts shop workers at risk?

**David T. C. Davies:** I agree with the hon. Lady that shoplifting is a serious offence, and repeat shoplifters and those who go out in organised gangs must be dealt with by the full force of the law. That is why I welcome the fact that this Government have brought in longer prison sentences for people carrying out the most serious offences. I do not understand why the hon. Lady will not join the Government in supporting longer prison sentences. Perhaps she should talk to her colleagues in the Welsh Government who seem to be against building any extra prison places.

**Jo Stevens:** The Secretary of State knows that the prison estate across Wales is not just full, but that overcrowding is significantly above safe limits. With his Government having to commandeer police cells, with judges being told to jail fewer people, and with criminals—including those convicted of assault—being released early on the instruction of his Justice Secretary, how can the Welsh public have any faith that they will be protected?

**David T. C. Davies:** The prison population has increased as a direct result of policies that the Government have implemented, to ensure that those committing the most serious offences spend more time in prison. That is something that the hon. Lady should be supportive of. She needs to talk to her colleagues in the Welsh Government, who have stated clearly in writing that they are completely against building any prison places. This Government are building emergency prison places and filling up prisons, because people who commit serious offences deserve to go to prison. The Labour party in the Welsh Government is saying clearly that it is totally opposed to building any extra prisons anywhere.

#### Economic Links: Wales and the North-west

2. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): What steps the Government are taking to improve economic links between Wales and the north-west. [906595]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** This Government are committed to strengthening the economy of north Wales and north-west England. We have recently announced that we will invest £36 billion in Network North, including £1 billion to electrify the north Wales main line. That will improve connectivity across the region, bringing many parts of north Wales within one hour of Manchester and Liverpool by rail.

**Scott Benton:** The announcement of the electrification of the north Wales main line will help to improve transport links between this region and the north-west of England, supporting economic growth, tourism and jobs across both areas. Does my hon. Friend agree that residents across Wales and my constituents in Blackpool will see real improvements in their local transport infrastructure as part of their share of this £36 billion that is available?

**Dr Davies:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. North Wales often feels overlooked by the Welsh Government. Indeed, the Welsh Government have said that the electrification of the north Wales line is not their priority. Just as it was Conservative Governments who built key elements of the A55 in the 1980s and 1990s, we now see a Conservative Government investing further in the infrastructure and prospects of north Wales and north-west England.

**Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind):** Connectivity is key to underpinning that economic growth, and the railway line between north Wales, through my constituency in St Helens and on to Manchester should epitomise that, but unfortunately it does not seem to be working at the minute. It is frequently overcrowded, and there are cancellations at the Manchester end and at the Chester end. Will the Minister speak to his colleagues in the Department for Transport as well as Transport for Wales, so that we might make some progress and make sure that my constituents can get to work and this line can deliver economic growth for the north-west and north Wales?

**Dr Davies:** Of course, improving rail is not simply about the rail infrastructure; it is also about the train operating companies and how they operate. The hon. Gentleman is right that Transport for Wales has struggled from time to time. I can reassure him that I do have discussions with it. In fact, I am also meeting the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) later today, when I will reiterate those concerns.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome the shadow Minister to her new position.

**Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Strong economic links are dependent on the Government actually having an economic plan, but the Conservatives' track record speaks for itself. They cancelled the electrification of the main line to Swansea, they are spending half a billion pounds but still potentially making up to 3,000 steelworkers redundant and their pitiful semiconductor strategy does not even give us a bit part on the world stage. Why should anyone believe

that their latest promises made for north Wales at a desperate party conference are worth the fag packet they are written on?

**Dr Davies:** I welcome the hon. Member to her position. She shares Welsh lessons with me, and I hope she will continue to do so. I urge her to be somewhat more positive about the £1 billion that has been announced for infrastructure development in north Wales by means of the electrification. Also, in terms of the steel industry at Port Talbot, the half a billion pounds has saved many jobs and means that decarbonisation can occur.

**Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC):** HS2 is

“going to benefit Wales, it's going to benefit people in North Wales who will benefit from better access at Crewe to London.”

That was the Secretary of State's central argument for withholding billions of pounds from Wales by claiming that HS2 benefits us. Now that the link at Crewe is another casualty of Tory chaos, will Wales Office Ministers stay true to their own logic and urge the Treasury to class HS2 as English-only?

**Dr Davies:** As the right hon. Lady knows, rail infrastructure is not devolved. I would argue that investment in Great Britain's rail infrastructure is of value to those in north Wales and the rest of Wales. Furthermore, HS2 is an important connection to the west midlands from London. Passengers from London to north Wales are likely to still use that.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** We all know that the money that has been committed is illustrative. In a major boost to Plaid Cymru's campaign, the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales has proposed devolving the Crown estate and reinvesting profits in communities through a sovereign wealth fund. The commission criticised the current system of wealth transfer from the poorest country in Britain to Westminster as “illogical and bizarre”. Whose side is the Minister on: Welsh communities or a system that extracts our natural wealth?

**Dr Davies:** We have had this discussion on previous occasions in various settings, but I would argue that the Crown estate allows this country to share risks and opportunities that it deals with. It does a fantastic job and I simply do not agree.

#### **Cross-border Healthcare: Welsh Government Policy**

3. **Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of Welsh Government policy on health authorities on cross-border healthcare.

[906596]

13. **Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of Welsh Government policy on health authorities on cross-border healthcare.

[906608]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** Of course, I work within the NHS in north-east Wales and west Cheshire and see the stark realities of the disparity in healthcare services between the two. It is concerning that the Welsh Government

have missed their target to eliminate two-year waits in most specialties and that more than 27,000 patients have been waiting over two years for treatment in Wales, compared with circa 280 in the whole of England. The Health Secretary has offered to consider requests from the Welsh Government to use alternate providers in England to reduce waiting lists and the distress that they bring.

**Dame Andrea Leadsom:** With the Welsh Labour Government facing cuts to their NHS as a decision of their own, does the Minister not find it extraordinary that they are looking at spending £122 million on new politicians and £33 million on a blanket 20 mph speed limit that nobody voted for in Wales?

**Dr Davies:** I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. It is scandalous that the Labour Welsh Government are prioritising spending on more politicians in Cardiff Bay as well as an unpopular 20 mph default speed limit. Their decisions mean less funding for the NHS, education and other important devolved services. They have the potential instead to invest in important capital projects such as the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Rhyl. They must re-examine their agenda.

**Robin Millar:** It gets worse: the UK Government have twice offered the Welsh Labour Government help in reducing patient waiting lists for important medical procedures, but neither offer has been taken up. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that, in fact, that offer still stands and that patients in Wales who are stuck and suffering on waiting lists have not been forgotten by the UK Government?

**Dr Davies:** Having spoken with the Department of Health and Social Care, I can confirm that the offer still stands. My hon. Friend will find it of interest to know that the Labour Welsh Government did write in response to the latest offer several weeks after that offer was made. Unfortunately, the Minister did not confirm whether they would accept the offer. In the interests of tens of thousands of patients, I strongly encourage them to do so.

### Cost of Living

4. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the cost of living in Wales. [906597]

6. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the impact of increases in the cost of living on people in Wales. [906599]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues, including the cost of living. The Government have made certain that the state pension, benefits and the minimum wage have all risen in line with inflation. Last winter, the Government's energy support schemes saw them paying about half the average fuel bills for homeowners across the United Kingdom.

**Chris Elmore:** The Bridgend food bank and the Baobab Bach food pantry are running out of food. My constituents in Ogmore and those across the Bridgend borough

literally cannot afford to pay for the weekly shop. What work is the Secretary of State doing to tackle the significant access-to-food crisis that is impacting constituents in the Bridgend county borough and right across Wales?

**David T. C. Davies:** As I have already mentioned, the Government have made sure that pensions, benefits and the minimum wage have risen in line with inflation. There have been other payments as well, with £900 to households on benefits, £300 to pensioners and £100 to those in households where there have been disabilities. The Government have made certain at all times to prioritise the least well off. May I respectfully suggest that the hon. Gentleman should listen to the earlier questions and suggest that the Welsh Government stop spending money on extra politicians and put that back into communities where it is needed?

**Patricia Gibson:** Polling of 2,000 people by Public Health Wales found that about eight in 10 Welsh citizens are either worried or very worried about the rising cost of living, with almost half saying that it will have a negative impact on their mental health. Similar concerns have been expressed in Scotland. What consideration have the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues given to the SNP's call for a £400 energy rebate as winter approaches?

**David T. C. Davies:** As I said, in addition to the Government's priority on supporting the least well-off and the fact that the Government paid around half of people's energy bills during the last winter, we will continue to prioritise those who are having difficulties. If the hon. Lady is really worried about a cost of living crisis and the impact on energy, she will do well to revisit her party's policy of getting rid of the oil and gas industry in the UK, including in Scotland—something that would cost 200,000 jobs and have a terrible impact on energy prices for homeowners across the United Kingdom.

**Sarah Atherton** (Wrexham) (Con): The Wrexham-Flintshire investment zone bid could bring huge benefits to my region, including more and better-paid jobs. An investment zone requires collaboration between the Welsh and UK Governments. There is a possibility that the UK Government could support two zones in Wales, but the Welsh Government have yet to give me a commitment to a second zone. If they do, will the UK Government also commit?

**David T. C. Davies:** I can assure my hon. Friend that I have made a very strong case to Cabinet colleagues for two investment zones in Wales. She is right that we need the co-operation of the Welsh Labour Government. I suggest that she, and any Members who represent north Wales, write to the Welsh Labour Government's economic development Minister and suggest that Welsh Government prioritise two investment zones for Wales. We would be delighted to work with them when they get around to doing that.

### Strength of the Union

5. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the Union. [906598]

12. **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the Union. [906606]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** Our United Kingdom is stronger than ever. It is a testament to the strength of the Union that the UK Government have been able to support people across the country, including with £94 billion to respond to cost of living challenges.

**Deidre Brock:** At the Welsh Affairs Committee this morning, the First Minister Mark Drakeford blamed the UK Government for not giving adequate financial support to the Welsh Government in times of high inflation and a cost of living crisis. Can the Secretary of State tell us how much his Department is spending on promoting the UK Government in Wales? Why does he think that is a better use of taxpayers' money than funding services for the people of Wales? I am happy to receive an answer by email if he does not have that information to hand.

**David T. C. Davies:** First, I can assure the hon. Lady that the Welsh Labour Government are receiving a record-breaking settlement of more than £18 billion, and 20% more per head to spend on public services than is spent in England. Perhaps the First Minister should explain why we have longer NHS waiting lists in Wales and why education standards are lower. As far as spending on public affairs and promotion is concerned, I can assure the hon. Lady that a far greater amount is spent by the Welsh Labour Government than is ever spent by the Wales Office. Frankly, the proof of the strength of the Union is demonstrated by the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) has joined the Conservative and Unionist party, and she is very welcome.

**Hywel Williams:** I have raised the damaging effect of the UK's Brexit on the port of Holyhead and the north Wales economy in this Chamber 26 times. Holyhead has been disadvantaged by the lack of a green lane for exports to Northern Ireland. In August, at last, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs confirmed to me that there will now be a green lane for goods travelling from Wales to Northern Ireland through Holyhead and the Republic. I emphasise, as a precaution, that this is not a freeport issue—the Secretary of State is very keen on that. Rather, what specifically is he doing to promote and enable those new procedures for Holyhead?

**David T. C. Davies:** I did not quite hear all that, but on the port in Ynys Môn, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will take some comfort from the fact that the United Kingdom economy has grown more quickly outside the European Union than that of many nations that have remained in it. The Government have shown their absolute commitment to both north Wales and Ynys Môn through their development of a freeport project for the area and the announcement of £1 billion for electrification of the north Wales railway line, which will help to bring jobs and investment into north Wales.

**Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Barry is Wales's largest town, but it has been ignored by the Welsh Government for decades. It has significant regeneration challenges, like many places. I congratulate

my right hon. Friend on awarding Barry towns regeneration status, but can he reassure me that that does not preclude Barry from benefiting from levelling up funding?

**David T. C. Davies:** Obviously, I welcome the announcement, but my right hon. Friend is far too modest, since he has been knocking on the door of the Wales Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for a very long time to demand extra funding for Barry. He makes a very strong case for that, and I assure him that the UK Government will continue to listen to him.

**Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): Cross-border transport links between Wales and England are a key part of the strength of the Union. Does my right hon. Friend agree that cross-border projects, such as the Pant and Llanymynech bypass and the longer term ambition to dual the A483-A5 passing through Clwyd South and North Shropshire, are vital?

**David T. C. Davies:** The United Kingdom Government are absolutely determined to support infrastructure projects in Wales. We have done so through the levelling-up funds. It will happen again through the shared prosperity fund and it has, of course, been happening through the growth deals. What we do need is a Welsh Labour Government that will support infrastructure. That is why I find it so disappointing that the Welsh Labour Government have ruled out building any new roads ever again. It worries me greatly that that is seen as a blueprint for the rest of the United Kingdom.

### Energy Costs

7. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on energy costs for (a) households and (b) businesses in Wales. [906600]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** The Secretary of State and I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues, including energy costs. The Government spent nearly £40 billion protecting households and businesses from high energy bills over last winter, meaning that between October 2022 and June 2023, a typical household saw half of their energy bills paid for by the Government.

**Tonia Antoniazzi:** The Government did not listen to the renewable energy sector, which repeatedly warned them that the budget set for this year's offshore wind auction was too low to attract bidders to develop offshore wind in the Celtic sea. Can the Minister tell the House why that advice was ignored, leading to not a single bid being made?

**Dr James Davies:** What I can tell the hon. Lady is that it is an issue of discussion that the Secretary of State and I are engaged with. We understand the importance of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea and it will progress in due course.

### Speed Limits

8. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the potential impact of the Restricted Roads (20 mph Speed Limit) (Wales) Order 2022 on the Welsh economy. [906601]

11. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the potential impact of the Restricted Roads (20 mph Speed Limit) (Wales) Order 2022 on the Welsh economy. [906605]

**The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies):** No sensible person would oppose a 20 mph speed limit where there is a case to be made on the basis of safety outside hospitals, old people's homes or schools, but the blanket decision by the Welsh Government, which has been opposed by over 460,000 signatories to the largest petition in the Senedd's history, is deeply unpopular, deeply expensive and completely wrong.

**David Duguid:** Given that more than 450,000 people in Wales have signed an online petition against the Labour Welsh Government's blanket 20 mph roll-out, does my right hon. Friend agree that devolved Administrations across the United Kingdom should listen to the people and the communities they serve, rather than their own narrow centralised agenda?

**David T. C. Davies:** I agree completely with what my hon. Friend says. The Welsh Labour Government need to listen to what people have said about this and they need to listen also to all those who are opposed to this ridiculous war on motorists, which is not just about a 20 mph speed limit but a block on any new roads being built and extra road charges.

**Marco Longhi:** Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Can I just say to Conservative Members that the hon. Member was in the middle of asking a question? It is disrespectful to your own side. You should think about what you are doing. People should wait. Just because you want to cheer somebody coming in. Do it at the right time. That is totally inappropriate.

**Marco Longhi:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Labour likes to showcase Welsh Labour as its blueprint for the rest of the United Kingdom. Does the Secretary of State not agree that this is yet more evidence of its war against motorists wherever they are: Wales, Dudley North or the rest of the United Kingdom?

**David T. C. Davies:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We need to be very careful of this blueprint for Britain, which includes a ban on new roads, a ban on meal deals, a tourism tax, road charges, over £100 million being spent on more politicians, a £1,600 minimum wage being paid to some asylum seekers and a ban on news channels in the Assembly that Senedd Members disagree with. That is not a blueprint for Britain; it is a recipe for disaster. I hope the people of Wales will take note and vote Conservative in the next election.

### Mortgage Interest Rate Increases

9. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the impact of increases in mortgage interest rates on homeowners in Wales. [906602]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Dr James Davies):** The Government recognise that this is a concerning time for mortgage holders, especially those who are due to come to the end of a fixed deal in the immediate future. We are supporting borrowers who

are struggling with their mortgage payments through the new mortgage charter. It sets out the standards that signatory lenders will adopt, including new flexibilities to help customers manage their mortgage payments over a short period.

**David Linden:** Throughout Scotland, people are paying the price of the Westminster-made cost of living crisis as a result of this Conservative Government and the actions of the Tories in crashing the economy last year. Will the Government bring forward that mortgage interest relief scheme for my constituents, and perhaps even for those in East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow?

**Dr Davies:** The Government have, of course, provided "support for mortgage interest" loans for those receiving income-related benefits, and the pre-action protocol helps to make repossessions less likely. That is in addition to the action that I have already outlined.

## PRIME MINISTER

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

### Engagements

Q1. [906569] **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 18 October.

**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak):** I know that the whole House will have been shocked by the scenes at Al-Ahli Hospital. As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has said, we are working independently and with our allies to find out what has happened. I am sure that Members will raise further questions about this during today's session.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

**Chris Law:** May I associate myself, and the whole of my party here, with what has been said about the horrors and the unfolding tragedy of last night's bombing of the hospital in Gaza?

The Rafah border crossing from besieged Gaza into Egypt has been hit by several Israeli airstrikes, causing absolute terror to those who urgently need the crossing to be open in order to escape. Nadia El-Nakla, an elected councillor in my city of Dundee and the wife of Scotland's First Minister, has had to take calls from her parents Elizabeth and Maged, who, like all others trapped in Gaza, have been describing the horrors of death and indiscriminate killings everywhere. Members of Nadia's family were hit yesterday by a rocket from a drone, and her mother was saying her final goodbyes this morning, adding:

"last night was the end for me, better if my heart stops and then I will be at peace, I can't take another night."

With military action intensifying and the death toll rising rapidly, the Prime Minister's first responsibility must be to bring British citizens home. Can he please give his personal assurance that every single step is being taken to open the Rafah crossing, both for humanitarian aid and to enable UK nationals like Nadia's family to flee?

**The Prime Minister:** The thoughts of everyone in the House will of course be with the families affected by what is happening in Israel and in Gaza, and I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance: we are doing everything in our power to ensure the safety of British nationals who are caught up in all this. That includes my calls with leaders across the region, particularly the conversations about opening the Rafah border crossing—which is why I made talking to President Sisi a priority last week—and we continue to engage in dialogue with both the Israelis and the Egyptians about the crossing.

Q4. [906572] **Sajid Javid** (Bromsgrove) (Con): I am proud to live in the most successful multi-racial democracy in the world, but it saddens me, and I think it shames the whole House, that British Jews have been subjected to such vile abuse and hatred in recent days. Antisemitism and all hate crimes fly in the face of British values, and we should not allow events abroad, no matter how horrific they are, to be used to sow seeds of division in our own country. While I welcome all the actions that my right hon. Friend is taking to fight hate crime and to bring people together, may I ask him to consider urgently an immediate and specific policy of revoking the visas of any foreign national who commits an act of antisemitism or any other hate crime?

**The Prime Minister:** I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, who has himself done so much over the years to fight antisemitism. The increase in the number of such incidents that we have seen over the past week is utterly sickening, and this Government will do whatever it takes to keep our Jewish community safe. We have provided an additional £3 million to support the Community Security Trust, we are working with the police to ensure that hate crime and the glorification of terror are met by the full force of the law, and under our existing immigration rules we have the power to cancel a person's presence in the UK if it is not conducive to the public good. We will not tolerate this hatred—not in this country, not in this century.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Leader of the Opposition.

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Can I start by warmly welcoming my hon. Friend the new Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Michael Shanks)? The news last night of hundreds killed at the Baptist hospital in Gaza is incredibly distressing, but it is much worse for the people of Gaza. Their fear that there is no place of safety is profound. International law must be upheld, and that means hospitals and civilian lives must be protected. Last night the Foreign Secretary said that the UK will work with our allies to find out what has happened. I know that this only happened last night, but can the Prime Minister please tell us when he thinks he might be able to update the House on progress with that work?

**The Prime Minister:** I know that the whole House will have been shocked by the scenes at Al-Ahli Hospital. Any loss of innocent life is a dreadful tragedy and everyone will be thinking both of those who have lost their lives and of the families they leave behind. We should not rush to judgment before we have all the facts on this awful situation. Every Member will know that the words we say here have an impact beyond this House.

This morning, I met the National Security Adviser and the Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, and I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that our intelligence services have been rapidly analysing the evidence to independently establish the facts. We are not in a position at this point to say more than that, but I can tell him that we are working at pace and co-operating and collaborating with our allies on this issue as we look to get to the bottom of the situation. We will also continue all our efforts to get humanitarian aid into the region.

**Keir Starmer:** I thank the Prime Minister for his answer. The terrible news last night came as we are still mourning the terrorist attack on Israel last week, with Jews taken hostage, mutilated, slaughtered. Yesterday I met the families of some of the British hostages held by Hamas. Every minute of every hour of every day, they hope for good news but fear the worst. They know that the lives of their loved ones are in the hands of murderers. It is unimaginable agony. Israel has a right—a duty—to defend itself from Hamas, keep its people safe and bring the hostages home, but is it not clear that if Hamas had a single concern for human life, a single concern for the safety of the Palestinian people, they would never have taken these hostages, and that they should release them immediately?

**The Prime Minister:** It is important for us consistently to remember that Israel has suffered a shockingly brutal terrorist attack, and it is Hamas, and Hamas alone, who are responsible for this conflict. Our thoughts are rightly with those who have been taken hostage and their families. The distress they are feeling will be unimaginable for all those affected. I will be meeting some of the families and offering them all the support of the British Government to get their relatives home. We are working around the clock with our partners and allies to secure their freedom and, importantly, in among my other regional calls, I spoke specifically with the Emir of Qatar yesterday on this very issue, which we discussed at length. The Qatari Government are taking a lead in working intensely to help release hostages using their contacts in the region, and we are working closely with them to ensure the safe return of the British hostages.

**Keir Starmer:** Yesterday I also met charities with staff working in Gaza and heard their accounts of the harrowing humanitarian crisis: children fleeing their homes; hospitals barely able to function. The lights are going out, and the innocent civilians of Gaza are terrified that they will die in the darkness, out of sight. International law must always be followed. Hamas are not the Palestinian people, and the Palestinian people are not Hamas. Does the Prime Minister agree that medicines, food, fuel and water must get into Gaza immediately? This is an urgent situation, and innocent Palestinians need to know that the world is not just simply watching, but acting to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.

**The Prime Minister:** As I said on Monday, an acute humanitarian crisis is unfolding to which we must respond. It is right that we support the Palestinian people, because they are victims of Hamas too. That is why we have provided a further £10 million in humanitarian aid for people in the region, and we are working on pre-emptively moving aid and relief teams to Egypt, specifically to the



el-Arish airfield. We are working with local partners like the Egyptian Red Crescent and the United Nations, primarily, and deploying Navy assets to the region, as well as exploring how we can support logistical requirements.

I have also raised the issue of humanitarian access, as a priority, in all my conversations with every leader in the region. We will continue to work with them to get aid to where it is needed as quickly as possible.

**Keir Starmer:** As has been alluded to, since Hamas's terrorist attack our country has seen a disgusting rise in antisemitism: Jewish businesses attacked, Jewish schools marked with red paint and Jewish families hiding who they are. And we have seen an appalling surge in Islamophobia: racist graffiti, mosques forced to ramp up security, and British Muslims and Palestinians spoken to as if they are terrorists. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that every Member of this House has a duty to work in their constituency and across the country to say no to this hate and to ensure that every British Jew and every British Muslim knows they can live their life free from fear and free from discrimination here in their own country?

**The Prime Minister:** All of us in this House can play our part in stamping out those who seek to cause division and hate in our society. We will make sure that we continue funding the Community Security Trust and the equivalent protective security grant that protects mosques and other places of worship for the Islamic community in the UK. That funding was increased earlier this year. We will also remain in dialogue with the police to make sure they are aware of the full tools at their disposal to arrest those who perpetrate hate crime and who incite racial or other religious violence. There is no place for that in our society, and I know this House will stand united in making sure those who do this face the full force of the law.

**Keir Starmer:** We do not want this conflict to harm us here at home, and we do not want it to escalate in the middle east, where there has been too much bloodshed, too much darkness, for too long. A two-state solution—a Palestinian state alongside a safe and secure Israel—feels more distant than ever, but it remains the only way through. Does the Prime Minister agree that, because hope is at its thinnest, we must work our hardest to ensure that the voices of division and despair are sidelined and that, however difficult it seems, the hope of a political path to peace is maintained?

**The Prime Minister:** It is precisely because it is that vision of a more hopeful, peaceful future that Hamas have tried to destroy that we must redouble our efforts to try to bring that future about. In all the conversations that the Foreign Secretary and I have had with regional leaders, we have emphasised our commitment to making sure that we make progress on all the avenues that will lead towards that peaceful future. That has been a feature of our dialogue, and I am confident there is willingness in the region not to escalate this crisis beyond dealing with Hamas, the terrorist organisation, and to strive very hard towards a future where Palestinians and Israelis can co-exist peacefully, side by side, and look forward to a future filled with dignity, security and prosperity.

**Keir Starmer:** This is a crisis where lives hang in the balance and where the enemies of peace and democracy would like nothing more than for us to become divided and to abandon our values. Does the Prime Minister agree that, during this grave crisis, the House must strive to speak with one voice in condemnation of terror, in support of Israel's right to self-defence and for the dignity of all human life, which cannot be protected without humanitarian access to those suffering in Gaza and the constant maintenance of the rule of international law?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree. We will, in this House, speak with one voice in condemning Hamas for perpetrating a shockingly brutal terrorist attack and causing untold suffering for many. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman said, we stand united in supporting Israel's right to defend itself, to protect its people and to act against terrorism. Unlike Hamas, the Israeli President has made it very clear that Israel's armed forces will operate in accordance with international law. We will continue to urge the Israelis to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians, while remembering, importantly, that it is Hamas who are cruelly embedding themselves in civilian populations.

**Q7. [906575] Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con):** May I associate myself with the words of the Prime Minister, and commend him and the Foreign Secretary for the work they are doing to find a peaceful settlement in the middle east?

May I also welcome the Prime Minister's decision to provide £12 billion-worth of funding for east-west high-speed rail lines between Manchester and Liverpool, and his focus on great northern towns as well as cities in the north? Will he ensure that towns such as Warrington benefit fully from this rail upgrade and that a hub station at Warrington Bank Quay linking Northern Powerhouse Rail to the west coast main line remains a key part of the Network North?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his continued campaign to improve rail services in Warrington. He is right: we will be investing £12 billion to better connect Manchester and Liverpool. That would allow for the delivery of Northern Powerhouse Rail, exactly as previously planned, including high-speed lines, which would provide better rail connections for the people living in northern towns such as Warrington. I know that he will be discussing this further when he meets the rail Minister.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Scottish National party leader.

**Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP):** We all continue to unequivocally condemn the abhorrent terrorist attack on the Jewish people and the Israeli state. We fully support the defeat of Hamas and, of course, the safe return of all hostages who have been taken. So, too, I hope, do we all share the same common humanity of protecting civilians and condemning any acts of collective punishment against the Palestinian people. In that regard, many of the images emanating from Gaza in recent days will shock us all to the core, so may I ask the Prime Minister: will he join those of us on these Benches and call for an immediate ceasefire in the region?

**The Prime Minister:** We believe that Israel does have a right to defend itself, to protect its people and to act against terrorism and ensure that the awful attack we have seen from Hamas cannot happen again. Unlike Hamas, the Israelis, including the President, have made it clear that their armed forces will operate in accordance with international law. We will continue to urge the Israelis to take every precaution to avoid harming civilians.

**Stephen Flynn:** My ask for a ceasefire is done with all sincerity, not only in order to protect civilians, but to ensure that we have the safe creation of humanitarian corridors, which will allow not only for food, water and vital medicines to get into Gaza, but for innocent civilians caught up in this terrible conflict to flee. In respect of those who wish to flee, may I ask the Prime Minister what early consideration, if any, his Government have given to the creation of a refugee resettlement scheme akin to those previously put in place for Syrian nationals, Afghani nationals and, of course, Ukrainian nationals?

**The Prime Minister:** I am proud that we are already one of the most significant contributors to the United Nations' efforts to support Palestinian refugees; our funding supports about 5.8 million refugees annually, and on Monday we announced a significant increase in our funding of aid to the region, including to the UN to support refugees. With regard to humanitarian aid, as I said before, we are already working through pre-emptively moving aid and relief teams into the region. But, critically, the most important thing is to open up access for that aid to get into Gaza, which is why our conversations with the Egyptians and others are so critical. We continue to work closely with allies to find every way to get that aid to the people who need it as quickly as possible.

Q8. [906577] **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Last night, sections of the British media were reporting as fact that it was Israeli rockets that had landed and attacked the Al-Ahli Hospital, relying on information supplied by officials in terrorist-controlled Gaza. The headlines have since been rewritten, but the outpouring of Jew hate on social media overnight was vile. So will the Prime Minister please make the point again that the way that this conflict is being reported has massive implications for our Jewish community and that any information coming from Hamas must be treated with a degree of scrutiny and cross-examination that is, sadly, sometimes lacking?

**The Prime Minister:** I commend my right hon. Friend for his excellent intervention. He is absolutely right that we should not rush to judgment before we have all the facts on the appalling situation that we saw yesterday, particularly given the sensitivity that he raises and the impact on communities here, but also across the region. As I said, it is incumbent on all of those in positions of responsibility in this House and outside in the media to recognise that the words we say will have an impact, and we should be careful with them.

We are working with our allies to establish the truth of what has happened. We will do that robustly and independently, but my right hon. Friend is right to point out that in the same way as we do not treat what comes out of the Kremlin as the gospel truth, we should not do that with Hamas.

**Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson** (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I associate my party with the comments made in relation to the deplorable loss of innocent human life in both Israel and Gaza.

Having left the European Union, building links and co-operation across the four nations of our United Kingdom can only strengthen the Union. Will the Prime Minister agree with my proposal for the creation of an east-west council, to bring together all parts of the UK family to discuss and collaborate on trade and the many other opportunities presented by the Union?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman made a powerful case in his conference speech last weekend for a strong, functioning Northern Ireland within our Union. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has had the opportunity to discuss our shared commitment to the Union with the right hon. Gentleman's party over recent weeks and months, and I am grateful for the constructive approach and tone taken in those discussions. There is considerable merit in the idea of a new east-west council to further strengthen the Union, and I look forward to exploring the issue further with him and his colleagues.

Q9. [906578] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Following my right hon. Friend's decision to reallocate funding from HS2, may I urge him to consider a number of projects that will boost the economy and improve the quality of life for my constituents and others in northern Lincolnshire? In order for access to the Humber freeport to be improved, the A15 between Lincoln and the A180 needs to be dualled. In particular, the A180 causes no end of problems for residents in nearby villages because of its concrete surface, so I urge him to deal with its resurfacing. Finally, Mr Speaker—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Finally, I think the AA atlas has run out.

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend has been a long-standing champion for Cleethorpes, and particularly for the importance of strong regional transport connections. Network North will see Hull fully connected to the northern powerhouse network, which I know he will welcome, and north-east Lincolnshire will share in a brand new £2.5 billion fund to support local transport connections, perhaps including many or some of the ones he mentions. I know he will have been delighted to see LNER run a test service to Cleethorpes earlier this year, and I can assure him that the Department for Transport is continuing work to see a direct service to London reinstated.

Q2. [906570] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Government Members have said the way to fix the economic crisis that they have caused is to cut state spending by £200 billion and to freeze NHS budgets. When will the Prime Minister stand up to the extremists in his party and condemn those ideas?

**The Prime Minister:** Weeks after I became Prime Minister, we announced a significant increase of almost £14 billion for the NHS and social care. We followed that up with the first long-term workforce plan in the NHS's history, to ensure that we train the doctors and

nurses we need for the future. That demonstrates our commitment to the NHS. We also, I am pleased to say, reached a settlement with over 1 million NHS workers, including our nurses, for a full, fair and affordable pay rise.

**Q11.** [906580] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Aid poured into Gaza in 2005 when Israel withdrew. Enlightened governance could have made a success of it. It is Hamas that has turned it into hell, is it not?

**The Prime Minister:** I know that this is a subject on which my right hon. Friend speaks with authority, and I thank him for his previous work in the area. With regard to our aid funding, as the Foreign Secretary will outline later, we have very stringent governance in place to make sure that it is spent on the humanitarian needs that we want to address. I also agree with him that there is one person and one person alone that is responsible for the atrocities that we are seeing, and that is Hamas.

**Q3.** [906571] **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, may I associate myself and my party with all the comments about the protection of innocent civilians today wherever they may be?

A whole wing of Seaton Hospital in Devon is earmarked for demolition under this Government. The proposal to demolish this wing is an insult to the communities that raised millions of pounds to help fund the upkeep of services at that hospital. The space was given to NHS Property Services, but, thanks to the charging policy introduced by the Conservatives, that company is demanding £300,000 in rent. Will the Prime Minister let NHS Property Services hand over the space to health charities and community interest groups so that we can stop a wrecking ball going through Seaton Hospital?

**The Prime Minister:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, decisions about hospital infrastructure are a matter for the NHS. I am told that Devon Integrated Care Board is working together with NHS Property Services and local community healthcare providers to establish a future sustainable use for the currently vacant space. May I also take the opportunity to commend the work that my hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Simon Jupp) is doing on this topic?

**Q12.** [906581] **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): I would like to thank the Prime Minister for his commitment to improve transport links in the north. However, to ensure that a complete strategic approach to rail links is achieved across the region, it should include the much-needed upgrade to the Penistone line running from Huddersfield, through my constituency, to Sheffield—an upgrade that my hon. Friends the Members for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), who are sat with me, would also like to see delivered. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend commit to including the Penistone line in the Network North plans?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is a fantastic campaigner for the Penistone line rail upgrade. I know that my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary is conducting a corridor development study given the new

commitments to services on the Sheffield to Leeds and Sheffield to Hull lines, and, as part of that exercise, will consider enhancing the service on the Huddersfield to Penistone and Sheffield line, and I know that my hon. Friend will discuss this further when he meets the rail Minister.

**Q5.** [906573] **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): In Bristol South, around a third of children live in poverty, most of them in working households. It is about the same as in Tamworth, where the Conservative candidate for tomorrow's election made foul-mouthed comments about families struggling to make ends meet. This is the Prime Minister's Conservative party. Will he condemn that candidate's comments?

**The Prime Minister:** I am proud of our record supporting people with the cost of living. Thanks to the actions that we have taken, we have paid half of the typical family's energy bill last winter, frozen fuel duty and boosted the national living wage to record levels, and 8 million people across this country are now receiving direct cost of living payments worth £900. While we are helping people with the cost of living, all Labour's ideas are doing are costing them a fortune.

**Dehenna Davison** (Bishop Auckland) (Con): Mr Speaker, you may notice that many ladies in the Chamber today are wearing pink for breast cancer awareness, but roughly 15% of those with breast cancer are diagnosed with lobular cancer, a little known strain that is harder to detect, has worse outcomes and has no dedicated treatment. I am working with Dr Susan Michaelis at the lobular moonshot project to campaign for a dedicated research stream for lobular cancer. Will the Prime Minister meet with us to discuss this and how the Government can help us to save more lives from breast cancer?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for all her work in this area. Early diagnosis of cancer is key and the NHS "Help Us, Help You" campaign is seeking to address the barriers deterring patients from accessing diagnosis and treatment. Thanks to treatments and faster detection, survival rates for breast cancer are now increasing. Last year, more than 1 million scans were carried out, preventing an estimated 1,300 deaths from breast cancer. This Breast Cancer Awareness Month, I encourage anyone who is invited to take up the offer of breast cancer screening.

**Q6.** [906574] **Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): Of course the sadism of Hamas can only be condemned, and there is no question of Israel's right to defence and security, but international law is very clear that acting against international law in response to terrorism is unjustified, so in all the packages that the Prime Minister has announced vis-à-vis humanitarian aid, and the military package that he announced last week, can he tell the House how the Government will ensure that international law is adhered to, beyond just statements from Israel's head of state?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Member talked about our military assets. Let me be crystal clear: the assets that we have moved into the region are not there in any combat capacity. They are there for two reasons: first and foremost, to provide surveillance to ensure that this

crisis does not escalate and that arms are not being sent to entities like Hezbollah—that is what our surveillance aircraft are currently doing, and indeed the next set of assets arriving this week will also help—but also to provide contingency support for humanitarian assistance as and when required in the coming days and weeks.

**Jill Mortimer** (Hartlepool) (Con): On Sunday, Terrence Carney, a 70-year-old Hartlepoolian, was murdered by an asylum seeker. The people are afraid and angry. Every week, my office is besieged by asylum seekers. My staff are intimidated by young men. The fact is that most of them are illegal migrants who should be expelled. My thoughts and sympathies are with Mr Carney's family and friends, and all my constituents affected by this heinous crime. However, sympathy is not enough. They deserve action, and I am demanding it. Will the Prime Minister take action? Will he make sure that enforcement is delivered? Will he ensure that people who have no right to be here are expelled? Enough is enough. I want these people out of Hartlepool now.

**The Prime Minister:** As my hon. Friend knows, I am unable to comment on cases that are currently before the court, but I join her in expressing my sympathies to the families affected. I reassure her that the Government are doing everything that we can to tackle illegal migration and the harm that it causes by removing those with no right to be here in the UK. We have excellent long-standing relationships to return people to many countries. We are returning thousands more people this year than we have in the past, and we will continue to use every avenue at our disposal to ensure that it is only this country and this Government who decide who comes here, and not criminal gangs.

Q10. [906579] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): We have all been horrified by events in Israel and Gaza, and it is right that we condemn utterly the inhuman terrorism of Hamas. That should also be the case for any obscenities and war crimes carried out by the Israeli defence force. Both the UN and Médecins Sans Frontières have described the siege of Gaza and the withholding of water from its people as collective punishment—a war crime under the Geneva convention—yet this week both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have supported Israel's right to do so. Why?

**The Prime Minister:** Quite simply put, Israel suffered from a brutal terrorist attack at the hands of Hamas, and it is absolutely right that Israel has a right to defend itself, root out terrorism, and ensure that such an act does not happen again. As Israel's President has said, its military will operate within international law, but the hon. Gentleman failed to acknowledge that it is Hamas who embed themselves inside civilian populations and put innocent civilians in harm's way. He would do well to remember that.

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): My right hon. Friend has been absolutely right to lead the nation in reassuring the British Jewish community in the wake of the utterly appalling atrocity visited upon Israel and Jews on 7 October. I understand that my right hon. Friend will be travelling to the region, and he will see for himself the shock and trauma that is through the Israeli nation after this

event—shock and trauma that is accompanied by a rage. The enormous danger is that the Israeli reaction, led by a Prime Minister who will be held accountable for this failure of intelligence, is going to amount—is indeed amounting—to a war crime. That will not only be a crime; it will be a mistake. I urge my right hon. Friend: there is now no one better placed to urge Israel to stay within the international rule of law, and to exercise restraint on behalf of us all.

**The Prime Minister:** As a friend, we will always urge Israel to take every possible practical precaution to avoid harming civilians, and indeed to act within international law, as Israel's President has said its armed forces will do, while recognising the incredible complexity and difficulty of the situation on the ground. It bears repeating that Hamas is a terrorist organisation that embeds itself inside a civilian population. We always have to remember that. Israel is taking every possible practical step to avoid harming civilians, and we will do everything we can to provide humanitarian support to the area.

Q13. [906582] **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The Prime Minister will be delighted to know that nuclear veterans like my constituent's grandad, John, are starting to receive the medals he promised, but John is still not getting his full medical records. His blood tests from Christmas Island, which are crucial to claiming a war pension, are missing, and countless veterans report the same. As the Ministry of Defence has admitted that it holds at least 150 files withheld from national archives referring to blood test and other data, will he review those documents, report back to the House and hold a public inquiry into why medical record omissions have happened, and on whose instruction?

**The Prime Minister:** I start by thanking all our veterans for their contribution to our safety and security. I am delighted to have been able to announce the new nuclear test medal last year and that it is starting to be received by many people, including the hon. Lady's constituent. She will know that I cannot comment on ongoing litigation in respect of requests for health records, but I can say that anyone can request copies of their own medical data by submitting a subject access request to the Department, and if they are not satisfied with the processing of that request, they can make a formal complaint via the complaints process.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): We appear to be on a downward spiral in the middle east, which inevitably will lead to a humanitarian crisis. The role of Egypt will be fantastically important. What can we in the wider international community do to work with the Egyptians to ensure that refugees coming on to Egyptian soil are legitimate refugees who pose no threat to the Egyptian state and are not terrorists in disguise?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises an excellent point regarding the Egyptians' concerns about that border, but we have prioritised speaking with President Sisi and are in continued dialogue with our Egyptian partners to see what we can do to provide reassurances and get humanitarian aid to the region. We are working with local partners, including the Egyptian Red Crescent,

and the UN on the ground. There will be a significant logistical challenge in stockpiling aid at the border and then moving it into Gaza, but I assure my hon. Friend and the whole House that the Development Minister is actively engaged in that work as we speak, so that we can play a leading role in facilitating the provision of that aid.

**Mr Speaker:** This is the final question before the urgent question. I call Patricia Gibson.

Q14. [906583] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The industrial dispute at the Defence Equipment and Support, Ministry of Defence site at Beith in my constituency is dragging on, as workers engage in strike action for parity and fairness in the workplace. These workers are critical to ensuring that necessary supplies to Ukraine are uninterrupted,

but all attempts by the workers to resolve this dispute have proved to be unsuccessful in the face of management intransigence. Will the Prime Minister personally and urgently use his influence to ensure that a meaningful offer is made to these workers, so that the matter can be resolved, further strike action can be averted, and supplies to Ukraine can continue without disruption?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for highlighting the critical role played by non-craft support operatives at Defence Munitions. Different rates of pay for workers with different skills and qualifications are entirely normal practice in both the public and the private sector. This year, as part of DE&S pay 2023, a generous pay award was delivered which significantly improved the base pay of workers engaged in the dispute. I am told that officials continue to be open to talks on a constructive basis with the GMB to resolve the situation.

## Gaza: Al-Ahli Arab Hospital Explosion

12.39 pm

**Mr David Lammy** (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the explosion at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza.

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly)**: The destruction of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza is an appalling tragedy. A hospital is a place of compassion and care. This devastating loss of human life is profoundly disturbing. I am sure that I speak for the whole House when I offer my sincere condolences to the families of the deceased and to the injured.

The UK is working intensively with our allies to establish the facts. We will not rush to judgment. The whole House will understand that pointing fingers prematurely only fuels regional instability and upsets community cohesion here in the UK. We need a firm grasp of what has happened, not a slew of social media commentary. We all share a duty to be thoughtful and careful in how we respond to reports emerging from the conflict, which can be at best incomplete or at worst examples of active disinformation. We are carefully analysing the evidence that has been put in the public domain, and other information. As soon as we have reached a definitive conclusion for ourselves, we will make it public.

Some things are not in doubt, however. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set out, Hamas carried out a terrorist assault on Israel that was unprecedented in that country's 75-year history. The whole House united in support of Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism. In defending itself, Israel must act with professionalism and an unwavering commitment to international law. States must take every precaution to minimise civilian casualties and ensure that humanitarian support reaches those in need. I welcome President Herzog's unequivocal commitment—made both directly to me and in public—that Israel is operating in accordance with the rules of international law.

By embedding themselves in civilian populations, using innocent Palestinians as human shields, launching thousands of rockets since Saturday from one of the most crowded places in the world, and preventing civilians from heeding Israeli warnings about future areas of operation, Hamas reveal themselves and their callous indifference to human life. In this tense situation, UK diplomacy is relentlessly focused on our aims: supporting our nationals in their moment of need, pushing for and delivering humanitarian support, and working to prevent tensions spilling over into the wider region or playing out on the streets of this country. I have travelled to Israel and engaged with G7 allies and regional partners, and I will visit the region again later today because we recognise that this will require intensive effort.

None of us knows how this complex, protracted situation will develop. The Government are committed to keeping the House updated. Both here in the UK and in the region, this is a time for cool heads and determination to make a difference.

**Mr Lammy**: Thank you so much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his engagement with the Opposition at this very difficult time.

Today, we stand united in mourning the death of hundreds of innocent Palestinian civilians at the Al-Ahli Hospital. A place of healing became a scene of destruction. Hospitals must always be protected. The death of every civilian, Palestinian or Israeli, is an equal tragedy that pushes back the cause of peace.

When facing an incident of this magnitude, we all have a duty to act responsibly and judiciously as the facts are determined. Will the Foreign Secretary join me in urging everyone in this House and beyond to be wary of disinformation, and to avoid dangerous speculation before the facts are clear? Will he also update the House on what he is doing to deal with outside powers that might be seeking to drive division on our own shores?

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have rightly said that they are working to establish the facts, looking at intelligence with our allies, and that must be right. We also note President Biden's comments earlier today. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm whether the UK Government share that initial assessment? I also ask him to share with us what information he can, either publicly or on Privy Council terms. Does he agree that those responsible for the deaths at the Al-Ahli Hospital must be held to account?

Since Hamas's appalling terrorist attack on Israel 11 days ago, Labour has been crystal clear that: first, we support Israel's right to defend itself, rescue hostages and protect its citizens; secondly, international law must be followed at all times; and thirdly, civilians must not be targeted, aid must be provided and innocent lives must be protected. Gaza is in the middle of an active humanitarian emergency: innocent Palestinian civilians are terrified for their lives. Can the Foreign Secretary today commit that the Government will leave no stone unturned in their diplomatic efforts to secure humanitarian access to food, water, fuel, electricity and medicines, and to ensure the establishment of humanitarian corridors and the proper protection of humanitarian workers? Palestinian civilians in Gaza must know that the world is not simply watching, but acting on their behalf.

**James Cleverly**: The right hon. Gentleman makes a number of important points, which I commend to the House—a number of which I will respond to and, indeed, amplify. He is absolutely right that this is an incredibly sensitive situation, and not just for the region itself. Our desire to prevent this tragedy from expanding into a regional conflict remains an absolute priority, and of course we have a duty as a Government—I am sure it is a passion shared by the whole House—to ensure that Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK are safe and feel safe, and do not experience ramifications from circumstances that are far beyond these shores and beyond their control.

For that reason, everybody—particularly those who have a voice in the public sphere, whether formal or informal—should be particularly careful about what information they disseminate. They should be particularly vigilant against disinformation, and speculation is never useful. I appreciate that the House, and indeed the country, will want to understand what is going on in

real time, and sometimes the pause that we impose on ourselves to ensure that the information the Government provide is accurate can be frustrating, but I would prefer, of course, to be accurate rather than just to work at pace.

The right hon. Gentleman is right that there are malign influences seeking to take advantage of this terrible situation, and we do guard against that. We take note of what President Biden has said, but we will come to our own judgment. We will work on that quickly and ensure that our assessment is put in the public domain as soon as we are confident of the details.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): As the Foreign Secretary said, we should soon know the direct cause of this explosion. I will send him and the Prime Minister a letter that I have received from the Worthing Islamic society—I think that Jewish people and others in my constituency will agree with every sentence. It ends by asking the Government to use their “influence and support” to

“encourage a peaceful and sustainable resolution that prioritises the rights and well-being of innocent civilians”  
caught up in the onslaught.

**James Cleverly:** The Father of the House makes an incredibly important point. As a former Minister for the middle east, I am acutely conscious of the implications for Islamic communities both in the region and here in the UK, and the protection of those people is as close to our hearts as the protection of Jewish people here in the UK. We will relentlessly pursue what is the enduring UK Government position, which is a viable two-state solution, with Israelis and Palestinians living in peace side by side. Of course these circumstances are a setback, but nevertheless we will not be fatalistic. We will continue to work with Israel, the Palestinian people and the wider region to bring about that positive aim.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson.

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It appears that what happened last night at the Al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza was a war crime—it was a crime against humanity—and if that is the case, there can be no hiding place for those who gave the order and those who carried it out. Independent investigators must be allowed to find out exactly who is responsible for this atrocity and have them brought before the International Criminal Court.

The scenes of death and destruction from last night are beyond harrowing, but the tragic reality of this conflict is that innocent civilian lives are being viewed as little more than collateral damage. They are not collateral damage; every single human life matters, and they matter equally—Israeli, including the hostages, who must be immediately released, and Palestinian.

Today it was reported that, as a direct result of the draconian collective punishment against the civilian population of Gaza, children are dying of thirst. Will the Government now finally tell the Israeli Government that the imposition of a collective punishment is a crime, that it is a breach of international humanitarian law and that it must end immediately?

**James Cleverly:** I note what the hon. Member has said about the incident at the Al-Ahli Hospital. As I say, we will be making a statement only when we are comfortable about the facts. We have to be realistic that the opportunity for any kind of independent investigation going into Gaza is severely limited, which is why we are taking the time to ensure that we get this right.

In all our conversations with the Israelis, we have reinforced the need for the protection of civilians; they understand that and they agree. President Herzog has made a commitment about adherence to international law. We must, however, be completely clear that Hamas accept no such limitations on their actions. They have specifically targeted civilians and children—they went out of their way to identify and murder the most vulnerable—and it is completely appropriate for Israel to take action to protect its civilians and prevent Hamas from perpetrating further atrocities in that country.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): The situation is unbearable, but while the horrors of last night cannot be unseen, we must not look away. Violence is increasing across the region, but also in Europe and the US. We in this House have a duty to protect British nationals, so what assessment have the Government made of whether the joint terrorism analysis centre needs to raise the threat level? Can I also have reassurance about what is being done to protect out diplomatic staff around the world after the heinous attacks we saw on Israeli and American embassies overnight?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. We constantly assess the threat picture both here in the UK and in the region. I have conducted an all-staff meeting with Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff across the whole world—I am told that over 5,000 people attended that briefing. I made it clear that, as their employer, I regard my duty of care towards them as uppermost. We do of course continue to support British nationals overseas, including in the region, and our consular team are maintaining, as best they can, contact with British nationals in Israel, and indeed in Gaza. It is an incredibly difficult consular situation, but I can assure the House that we will remain, as far as we are able to, in contact with those British nationals seeking our support, and we are consistently trying to reopen exit routes from Gaza so that British nationals can leave.

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Foreign Secretary will be aware of the horror with which the missile strike on a hospital in Gaza, which caused hundreds upon hundreds of casualties, is regarded not just here in Britain, but in the region and internationally. The House has heard his injunction not to jump to conclusions, but would he support a genuinely independent inquiry into what is happening?

**James Cleverly:** Of course, an independent inquiry is the gold standard in the event of such a circumstance, but the simple truth in relation to having any kind of independent investigation in Gaza is that the current situation—bearing in mind that our own embassy team there are severely limited in what they are able to do,

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and the international community is not able to operate freely—makes the practicality of that incredibly difficult. We are making our own assessment. We will gather and analyse as much information as we can. We will not be led by any other nation; it will be a UK assessment of the situation. Once we have come to a conclusion, we will share it with the House and the country.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): I am sure that my right hon. Friend and the Government are wise not to rush to conclusions, and to have a proper investigation before they come to a conclusion about what actually happened in this utterly appalling incident. I am struck by the number of emails I have received from constituents who have already rushed to conclusions, and all blame Israel. Does he agree that this shows the important responsibility not only that broadcasters have to ensure they do not disseminate false information, but that owners of social media platforms have to try to avoid hate being spread literally around the world at times like this?

**James Cleverly:** My right hon. Friend will know that, within Government, action is being taken to ensure that social media owners act with greater professionalism and greater consciousness of the impact they have. I would make a broad point to broadcasters—I have had this conversation directly with them in the past—which is that I believe there is an attempt by broadcasters to try to outpace social media platforms. The days of breaking news on traditional platforms are long in the past; they should focus on accuracy rather than pace, because their words have impacts here in the UK and around the world.

**Sam Tarry** (Ilford South) (Lab): My heart breaks for everyone who lost their lives in the Episcopal hospital disaster last night. It is now quite clear that even hospitals are not a safe place of refuge anywhere in Gaza. That hospital was struck by a missile the week before yesterday. I want to understand quite clearly from the Foreign Secretary why, as we call on the country for humanitarian access to Gaza, we are not also calling for an immediate ceasefire to enable that to happen. It seems to me bizarre that we cannot call for a ceasefire to enable that humanitarian corridor to open, because the scale of death that is now unfolding will reach tenfold over the next few days.

In line with that, I would really like to hear from the Foreign Secretary assurances that he is speaking to our Israeli counterparts to ensure that any Gazans and Palestinians who do evacuate will have an absolute right of return to their lands and do not end up languishing, as the millions of other Palestinian refugees currently still do, in both Jordan and Lebanon.

**James Cleverly:** I have conversations regularly with the Israeli Government, and with the Governments of countries in the neighbourhood, about Palestinian refugees. I am unable to go into the details because they are extensive, but the hon. Member should be aware that we have always supported Palestinian refugees, with the £27 million to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and the recent announcement of an additional £10 million is a direct response to the situation there.

The simple truth is that Israel does have a right to defend itself. The truth is that Hamas have no interest in a ceasefire. They have no interest in resolution, they have never attempted to engage in a two-state solution, and they have made every attempt to collapse the Oslo process. They are no friend of the Palestinian people. They have fired literally thousands of rockets into Israel since Saturday. Israel does have the right to take action to defend itself and to recover its hostages, and the UK, while respecting that, will of course always encourage it to adhere to international law and to protect civilians.

**Dominic Raab** (Esher and Walton) (Con): The Foreign Secretary is surely right to say that we must not rush to judgment on this incident, but does he agree that one fact we know right now is that the primary moral, and as a result legal, responsibility for the appalling civilian life loss in Gaza today and in the days ahead lies with Hamas, first for their attack on Israel, and secondly for the systematic practice of using civilians as human shields?

**James Cleverly:** I know that my predecessor and right hon. Friend is very well read on this situation, and I pay tribute to the work he did when he was Foreign Secretary and I was his Minister for the Middle East and North Africa. He is absolutely right, and we must be clear-eyed about the trigger event. It was the most brutal mass murder in a terrorist action in the history of the state of Israel, and the largest loss of Jewish life on a single day since the holocaust. Of course Israel has the right to defend itself, and we must never forget that Hamas's actions of embedding themselves in civilian communities and putting Palestinian lives intentionally at risk to pursue their political aims is completely unjustifiable.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Whatever the outcome of the independent inquiries into what happened with the tragedy in Gaza yesterday, in reality Gaza is such a densely populated area that no matter what efforts are made, the effects of bombing will be indiscriminate. If the Government cannot go as far as calling for a ceasefire, will they at least call for the end of the rockets and the bombs? If they cannot go as far as to call for the end of the bombing, can they at least call on Israel to stop bombing the south, where refugees from Gaza City are going at the instructions of the Israeli army? A cease in the bombing could trigger the negotiations that enable the release of the hostages.

**James Cleverly:** I pay tribute to the work of the international community in trying to secure the release of the hostages. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister emphasised the work that the Qataris are doing in this instance. They are not the only ones doing that, and we will continue to support their efforts. I hear what the right hon. Gentleman says about calls to stop the air attacks on Gaza from Israel, but the simple truth is that the alternative is a ground assault by Israel and, as he says, the practicalities of any military operation in an area as densely populated as Gaza will be deeply challenging. Again, I remind the House that the people who murdered those revellers, those partygoers, those children and those old people embed themselves in civilian communities—in hospitals, in schools—specifically to use innocent Palestinians as human shields. We must all understand the culpability that they hold for many



of these civilian casualties, but I will, of course, once again speak with the Israelis about making every effort that they are able to make to minimise civilian casualties.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): Whoever was responsible for the hospital attack last evening, it was an appalling human tragedy, and we think of all those who have lost their loved ones at this time. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's commitment to be evidence-led in what the Government say about this incident. Does he agree that if the UK intelligence community, whether that is GCHQ, the Secret Intelligence Service, Defence Intelligence and so on, are having to take time and deliberate in order to come to a conclusion, perhaps all of us in this place, including media organisations outside this place, should also show the same caution and consideration before making statements that could prove incendiary?

**James Cleverly**: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. There is, of course, the completely understandable desire of media outlets to report promptly, but I believe they have a greater duty to report accurately and responsibly. Words that emanate from the UK are taken seriously. We have huge standing in the world, and things that are said at the Dispatch Box, in this House and on our media, are listened to around the world. Therefore, we have an enhanced duty to ensure that the words we say are accurate.

**Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I deplore the loss of all civilian life, Israeli and Palestinian, and I commend the Foreign Secretary for his caution over attributing blame for last night's attack. Does he think that we should also be cautious about the figures for casualties coming from Gaza? They do not describe all as civilian casualties; there is reason to believe that there is a very high volume of Hamas combatants among those figures.

**James Cleverly**: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I am not going to minimise the pain and suffering of those Palestinian families who have lost loved ones and had people injured, but we know that just as Hamas are abusing the Palestinian people, they also abuse the figures that they put in the public domain. We must be highly sceptical of any information coming out of Hamas, just as the Prime Minister said we should be. We remain focused on trying to reduce the pain and suffering of the Palestinian people, as well as supporting Israel and its self-defence. While doing so we should be deeply, deeply sceptical of any and all information coming from Hamas spokespersons.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his caution. We should remind ourselves of the words of Mark Twain:

"A lie can travel half way around the world"

before the truth has got its boots on. Never more certainly was that the case than here. I remind hon. Members that Hamas bear complete responsibility for everything. Our hearts go out to all the innocents who have died and suffered—of course they do—but Hamas are the perpetrators and they have brought this on themselves. We remind ourselves that when they murdered all those Israeli Jews in the territories, they filmed them and committed atrocities deliberately. That was to remind

the Israelis of the holocaust and what was likely to come. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that broadcasters should not enter into discursive debate? When an issue such as this happens, they should report the facts as known, and nothing further.

**James Cleverly**: My right hon. Friend speaks with authority and clarity on this, and I find myself in complete agreement with him. I have Jewish friends who are trying to keep their children off social media, because they know that they will be assaulted with images of Israelis who have been murdered and whose bodies have been desecrated. No one in the modern era should have to endure that kind of repeated pain.

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): Evacuation orders in the past week have included hospitals, but many vulnerable people are unable to move because of their disabilities or illness. What conversations has the Foreign Secretary had directly with UK aid agencies and non-governmental organisations about that situation? What more can the UK do to ensure that civilian populations, including medical and aid workers, are protected?

**James Cleverly**: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point, and my Department remains in close co-ordination with international aid agencies and NGOs. We recognise the practical difficulties of that evacuation order, and in a highly dense area such as Gaza we completely understand those practical difficulties, particularly for medical organisations. As imperfect as it may be, attempting to remove civilians from a future area of military operations stands in sharp contrast with the actions of Hamas, who are actively seeking to prevent people from leaving an area of future conflict, and intentionally putting civilians in the way, using innocent Palestinians as human shields.

**Sir Michael Ellis** (Northampton North) (Con): I commend the Foreign Secretary, and his Opposition shadow, for their tone, but the fact is that last night an evil terrorist organisation that murders Jews and oppresses Palestinians was instantly believed in a number of quarters, whereas many refused to acknowledge that Jewish babies had been brutally murdered without demanding graphic proof. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that unsubstantiated reports such as those we saw last night might actually cost lives, because they inflame tensions in an already highly volatile region?

**James Cleverly**: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. Everything has a cost, and rushed, inaccurate reporting costs lives. Everybody, whether they are formally involved in the reporting process, a citizen journalist or just active on social media, should be very conscious that this involves real lives in the most sensitive of circumstances and that such reporting could have repercussions not just in the area or the region, but in this country as well.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): We rightly unite to condemn the barbaric actions of Hamas against innocent Israelis, and the loss of Palestinian lives and the unfolding humanitarian crisis is a profound tragedy. The scenes at al-Ahli Hospital shock us all, and I hope the Secretary of State will do everything to ensure an independent investigation, but people in Gaza are trapped,

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so what more will he do to ensure consular support not just on the ground there, but to families heartbroken back here in the UK? Will he hear and heed the words of Nadia El-Nakla, the wife of our Scottish First Minister, whose family are trapped there right now? She said:

“We are not watching a natural disaster, this can be stopped.”

**James Cleverly:** The consular department in the FCDO has got in contact with the families of those British nationals who are trapped in Gaza, and we are providing ongoing consular support. The hon. Lady will understand that the experience of the First Minister, his wife and their family is a live example of the plight of a number of families. Information is incomplete, our access is severely limited and sadly we have to rely on a number of interlocutors and people over whom we do not have direct control, including Hamas. We will continue to support British nationals as best we can, until they have been evacuated from that area.

**Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con):** One fact that is not in dispute is that every rocket fired from Gaza into Israel is aimed at murdering civilians, in stark contrast to Israeli defensive action. Last night, there were Members in this place, including senior Members, scurrying around, stating as fact that this incident was caused by an Israeli rocket. The BBC and other media referred to statements by “Hamas officials”—I think they meant to say Hamas terrorists—and presented them as fact without challenge. That not only risks radicalisation of communities in this country, where we already know there is a problem with antisemitism, but puts Jews at risk. I urge colleagues to be careful of their comments given the role that blood libels play in promoting antisemitism.

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, and I restate my request of all people commenting on this—whether they have a formal role within the media or are in a high-profile position, such as Members of this House—to be thoughtful of the implications of their actions, to be sceptical of all information coming out from Hamas, and to take a little extra time to verify, which can literally save lives here and abroad.

**Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** I know this situation is complex, and the taking of life and hostages, whether Israeli or Palestinian, is abhorrent, but we have to recognise that Palestinians cannot defend themselves. They have no means, and now their places of sanctuary, such as hospitals, are no longer safe places either. For that reason, I urge the Foreign Secretary once more to call for a ceasefire, so that we can see a de-escalation in this horrific conflict.

**James Cleverly:** Of course everybody—I will rephrase that. All reasonable people want this terrible situation to be resolved, and resolved quickly. This was not a conflict that Israel asked for; it is a conflict that they were forced to engage in because of the mass murder in their country perpetrated by Hamas terrorists who embed themselves in schools, hospitals and in civilian communities.

Calls for ceasefires are all well and good, but I have seen nothing—nothing—that leads me to believe that Hamas would respect calls for a ceasefire.

**Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con):** May I say to my right hon. Friend that whatever the investigation finds out, in a sense it will not matter a great deal to all those who are dead in the hospital? Whether the Israeli explanation is correct that it was an Islamic Jihad missile that misfired and then landed among explosives that were on the hospital site that then killed so many people, or whether it was an Israeli strike, in the end both sides have now committed war crimes. If they are just additional crimes being added to the ledger on either side, that is simply what it will be. I say to my right hon. Friend, in his relations with Israel and in reinforcing the position of the Prime Minister, that the only way to get out of this mess is a ceasefire. Otherwise, we will not see the relief of people who are starving and are dehydrating to death—that is a collective punishment, which is illegal under international law—following the deportation of people from northern Gaza, which again is illegal under international law. There are specific offences that have already taken place, and I say to my right hon. Friend: for all our sakes, he should work, as he said, with clear-minded determination to get the best answer from our ally.

**James Cleverly:** The House needs to understand that prior to Hamas’s terrorist attack, tens of thousands of Gazans passed through the border into Israel every day in order to work. Israel provided—often without payment—water, electricity and gas to the people of Gaza. That was interrupted as a direct result of Hamas’s brutal terrorist action. Thousands of rockets are fired from Gaza into Israel from in and among schools, hospitals and civilian communities. We do of course always remind Israel, as we would any other nation involved in military operations, of their duties under international law. President Herzog, Israel’s head of state, has reinforced that commitment. We hear no such commitment from Hamas.

**Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab):** Last night’s absolute tragedy of the explosion at the Al-Ahli Hospital will simply intensify passions and polarise the debate even more. Many children and young people here in the UK will have seen the images on our televisions and screens and on social media platforms, and I think they will be influenced by that. While I thank the Government for the money and support they are giving to the organisations protecting faith schools, mosques and synagogues, can the Minister tell us what he is doing to provide advice and support to ordinary schools and our universities, where there is an intensification of hatred emerging and where I am hearing of both antisemitic and Islamophobic views being expressed and attacks being wrought on individuals?

**James Cleverly:** The right hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. While I will not go into details of conversations in Cabinet, I can assure her that the protection of all communities in the UK was something that the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities highlighted. That very much goes hand-in-hand with the commitment that the Home Secretary has made that we will protect all communities

in the UK—Muslim, Jewish and others—and we will work with institutions, whether educational institutions or others, to try to ensure that the people at those institutions can go about their lives free from fear, intimidation and discrimination.

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much agree with the Foreign Secretary that the entity responsible for the loss of lives we are seeing now is Hamas: a terrorist barbaric organisation that killed innocent Jewish people. The question now is about doing everything we can to save lives of both Israeli and Palestinian people who are innocent in that regard. I welcome the Government's commitment to humanitarian assistance for the ordinary people of Palestine and the Foreign Secretary's differentiation, like the Prime Minister's differentiation, between the people of Palestine and the terrorist organisation Hamas.

The Foreign Secretary says that, moving forward, we will work towards a two-state solution. The people in the region want to know what that two-state solution is. Is that based on Security Council resolution 242 and the 1967 borders, which the United Kingdom signed up to? What is a clear framework for that? The Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), has previously asked for the UK to appoint an envoy to the region. We have two brilliant contenders, if I may say so, in William Hague, the foreign former secretary who gets the region, and Alistair Burt, a brilliant, well-respected former Minister. We have choices and options. When will the Foreign Secretary outline that part of the next steps?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes some important points. The truth is that we remain committed to a two-state solution, with Palestinians and Israelis living side-by-side in peace and prosperity. While at the moment and in these circumstances that might feel like an unachievable aim, we refuse to be fatalistic and give up that aspiration. The details will be for negotiation, but he and the House will have heard us say on a number of occasions that it will be based on the 1967 borders, with land swaps and a shared capital in Jerusalem. But we will not be dogmatic; what we want to see is peace brought about. I hear what he said about appointing a special envoy. We have some of our most capable people in our posts in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem and in Gaza.

**Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I repeat my condemnation of the Hamas attacks against innocent Israeli citizens. We saw civilians in Gaza forcibly moved from their homes with no guarantee of safety or return, yet the Government failed to speak out. We saw food, water and electricity cut off in Gaza, yet the Government failed to speak out. Last night, we saw the destruction of a hospital in Gaza. The Government now need to speak out.

Will the Foreign Secretary support the International Criminal Court investigation into the situation in Palestine, given that the prosecutor has said that its mandate includes the current context? That so obviously and urgently must include investigation of the hospital explosion. We need to ensure that no more blood is spilled. We need a ceasefire now.

**James Cleverly:** I must say to the hon. Lady that her assessment of the UK Government's voice on this issue is fundamentally wrong. We have consistently discussed with Israel—and publicly—our commitment to humanitarian law. She needs to understand that a military force highlighting a future potential area of conflict and encouraging people to move away from that area of conflict is not forced relocation. [*Interruption.*] It is not forced relocation. I draw her attention to the actions that Hamas have taken to prevent innocent Palestinians from moving away from places of danger. The contrast could not be more stark.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): Given that we do not know the facts about what happened and whether, for example, this was a ghastly mistake, we should be here not to blame but to mourn the loss of so many doctors, staff and patients at the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, which I and several other hon. Members from the House visited more than a decade ago. It was founded in the late 19th century by the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and is run by it to this day, so it is likely that Christians as well as Muslims will have lost their lives.

Will my right hon. Friend, whose approach has been appropriately calm at a time when we need to reduce and not inflame tensions both domestically and in the middle east, do his best to stay in touch with the Anglican Church to see if it has more information about what has happened to those who were there, to see how we can help re-establish what was a valuable programme—for example, it provided free breast cancer treatment and mobile clinics—and do all he can to think about how, in the longer term, we can enable people in that troubled land to co-exist in a way that we have, for so long, failed to do, supporting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency as far as possible on its humanitarian mission?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the tragic loss of life in this instance. As I have said, the UK Government share in the grief of those who have lost loved ones, irrespective of their faith or their community. We know that there are incredibly passionate voices on both sides, but, as I have said a number of times, we have a duty to be calm and careful when we speak about this issue. We will continue to work for peaceful co-existence of all the communities in that region. As difficult as that is, it will remain a priority for the UK Government.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. It is my intention to call all Members who were here at the beginning of the urgent question and who are trying to catch my eye. I have to say to the House that we are clearly dealing with a very sensitive, emotive and sad subject, but it is not necessary for every Member to express their grief, understanding and empathy. That has been done. Let us take it for granted that we are all broken-hearted about the situation; let us not repeat that before every question. This is not an occasion for speeches; it is one for questions. If we can have straightforward, short questions that enable the Secretary of State to give straightforward, short answers, we will get everyone in. If not, there will be disappointment.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): I am terrified that there will be an escalation leading to many more civilians on all sides being murdered. I have listened intently to what the Foreign Secretary has said about why he is not calling for a ceasefire, but could he explain both as a diplomat and as a military man how we can get humanitarian aid in, how we can create safe zones and how we can prevent civilian loss of life? Slightly longer term, will he tell us what conversations he is having with the international community about long-term aid and support for the inevitable Palestinian refugees?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady, the Chair of the International Development Committee, makes an incredibly important point. I, the Prime Minister, my ministerial colleagues and of course our ambassadorial teams in the region have been speaking extensively to try to facilitate humanitarian access. That has been most notably with Egypt, but we have also been using our very good relationship with the Qataris to try to influence Hamas, and of course our direct relationship with Israel to try to broker some kind of humanitarian access, even if only temporarily. Thus far, that has been unsuccessful. We will continue to work on that. We have allocated an additional £10 million for direct humanitarian support for the Palestinian people—of course, we are not limited to just that—and we co-ordinating with the international community to ensure that whether in Gaza or wider in the region, Palestinians are looked after in these difficult times.

**Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): My constituent Rev. David Longe is a priest in North Norfolk and formerly served as a priest in Jerusalem. I spoke to him on the telephone last night, and he has potentially lost friends who were working in the Al-Ahli Hospital. He tells me that there are Gazans sheltering in churches, so will the Foreign Secretary please make it absolutely clear in his discussions that the humanitarian role that the churches are currently partaking in must not be underestimated and that the Roman Catholic Church in North Gaza and the Greek Orthodox Church must be absolutely protected for the people they are sheltering?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of the faith communities. We often talk about the Jewish faith and Islam but when it comes to this region, the Christian churches play an incredibly important role, and I pay tribute to them. I have heard his point, and I will continue to speak about the avoidance of civilian casualties, particularly in places of safe haven such as churches.

**Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): When seeking to counter an insurgency in Afghanistan over a decade ago, General McChrystal adopted a new concept for NATO soldiers: courageous restraint. This was to separate the insurgents from the civilians among whom they lived. Can the Foreign Secretary inform the House how courageous restraint can be urged on all combatants, including through the full resumption of the water supply to Gaza?

**James Cleverly:** Courageous restraint, which the hon. Gentleman highlighted, is now a well-embedded concept in professional military forces. I have discussed with representatives of the IDF my admiration for its professionalism and my expectation that it will maintain

that professionalism through any military operations. Courageous restraint is not a concept in the heart of Hamas terrorists. We must be realistic about that. Therefore, we will work with Israel and other countries in the region to try to bring this to a conclusion as quickly as possible, but we maintain our support of Israel's self-defence and we highlight the fact that Hamas are just as willing to see Palestinians killed as they are to see Israelis killed, to pursue their political aims.

**Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): Last night, much of the UK media felt it appropriate to immediately and with no room for doubt blame Israel, before the IDF gave its evidence that the rocket was launched from Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It is right that the UK Government independently assess what happened. All that is made so much harder because Hamas have no morals, no boundaries and no problem with killing any innocent civilian in Israel or Gaza. Will the Foreign Secretary reassure me that he knows that standing with Israel now will put us on the right side of history?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the callous nature of Hamas's activities and those of other terrorist groups embedded in Gaza. We expressed our solidarity with the Israelis in their time of grief in the aftermath of those terrible attacks, and we stand in solidarity with them still. We are good friends with the state of Israel. Good friends speak honestly with each other, and we will always do that, but we will always stand beside a nation that seeks to protect itself and its people in the face of such a relentless terrorist threat.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Last night's explosion at the Al-Ahli Hospital only adds to the unspeakable pain of innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza. As the Foreign Secretary knows, they face a deepening humanitarian crisis, unable to access food, water, fuel, electricity or medical supplies. When does he expect supplies of those lifesaving necessities to be restored to Gaza?

**James Cleverly:** We have spoken to Israel and countries in the region about the humanitarian need, which is why we put forward the additional money that the Prime Minister announced on Monday. Of course, we do not want those innocent Palestinians caught in Gaza, who are suffering because of the actions of Hamas, to suffer any more than is absolutely necessary. We will continue working with the international community on humanitarian support and with Israel on the preservation of civilian life.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I keep hearing the words of my mother in my brain, and I have done for the last week: "Twa wrangs dinnae make a right." Hamas are an indefensible organisation in any right person's books, but the fact that they will not do right does not mean that the UK Government should not demand and work hard towards a ceasefire, and make sure that humanitarian aid gets into Gaza. I thinking repeatedly, as do many others, of helpless children. I am a mother and a grandmother, and that is what I think about every night. Will the Foreign Secretary please make every effort not just to have money set aside but to tell us how he will get humanitarian aid into Gaza City and help those who are suffering in Israel as well?

**James Cleverly:** Calls for a ceasefire are understandable, and I have much sympathy for the position the hon. Lady sets out, but a ceasefire has to be respected by both parties in a conflict, and I have seen absolutely nothing in the behaviour of Hamas during and since the terrorist attack that gives me any confidence at all that they would respect a ceasefire. Unless they respect a ceasefire, it is not credible to demand that Israel does not defend itself against terrorism.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): To follow up on the previous point, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres has also called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire. Clearly, the Foreign Secretary has some issues with that, though I do not really understand why. Is it not appropriate for a third party with people on the ground, such as the UN, to make an assessment—one that, with respect, is probably more realistic than his? In the meantime, what safe corridors are being proposed? Has the Foreign Secretary considered them, so we can at least have some safe evacuation for Gazans?

**James Cleverly:** I remind the hon. Lady and the House that we have people on the ground. My staff are in danger in Gaza. They choose to put their lives at risk in an incredibly dangerous part of the world in order to give me direct insight into the realities on the ground. I urge her to be a bit more thoughtful with regard to the danger that my UK-based diplomats and locally engaged staff put themselves in.

The truth is that I have received nothing that gives me any indication that Hamas or the other terrorist groups operating in Gaza would respect a ceasefire. I respect the UN Secretary-General's call for a ceasefire. We would all love to see the bloodshed cease, but we have to be realistic about the fact that Hamas, like the other terrorist organisations in Gaza, have demonstrated over and over again a complete callousness towards human life, whether Israeli or Palestinian.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): After all the decades of suffering, injustice and occupation endured by the Palestinian people, this terrorism and the scenes of death and destruction at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital are truly heart-wrenching. Those responsible must be held to account, international law must be adhered to and there should be no collective punishment of the Palestinian people. Will the Secretary of State advise the House how he feels peace can be obtained, and of his efforts to urgently deliver food, water, medicines and other aid to blockaded Gaza?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Gentleman and the House will have heard the detailed explanation that I gave in answer to the initial question of the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). We work relentlessly with the countries neighbouring Israel and Gaza. I will travel to Egypt once again to try to facilitate humanitarian support, and we will work with those countries that are able to influence the leadership in Gaza. We will not rest. We will continue to do everything we can to alleviate this terrible humanitarian situation. The hon. Gentleman asked what is the best thing to do for peace. A good starting point would be terrorists not firing rockets from densely populated areas into Israel.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his clear commitment and true words that, I believe, have captured the collective opinion of us all in this House. As he said, last weekend Hamas terrorists killed 1,400 Israelis, injured 3,500 and kidnapped almost 200. The news last night and this morning filled us all with despair. The bombing of the ill and the elderly at Al-Ahli Arab Hospital is reprehensible to the extreme and to be condemned. However, the circumstances of that horrific event are not clear. Does the Secretary of State agree that while horror and sympathy are to be expressed, judgments must be withheld until all facts are known and clear?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Gentleman, as always, speaks with great thoughtfulness on this issue. The immediate and understandable expression of sympathy and condolence is absolutely right and proper, but that should not be conflated with a rush to judgment. Doing so has significant effects, and, as I have said, can quite credibly cause further pain, suffering and loss of life. We should all be conscious of that when we speak in the public domain.

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the work he is doing to bring home my constituent who is trapped in Gaza. I note his comments about the consular support for UK nationals. I would be grateful for any further information he can provide—if he can—on facilitating the safe passage of UK nationals and the flow of humanitarian aid. I urge him to pursue these matters on his trip to the region later today.

**James Cleverly:** I assure the hon. Lady and the House that those are exactly the issues I will be raising on my forthcoming travel to the region. The consular team in the FCDO is making regular contact with those people in Gaza for whom we have contact details, to give them as much notice as possible as and when an exit route becomes available. At the moment that has not become available, but we will keep working to open humanitarian routes and to inform people once they are opened.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): We do not yet know who is responsible for the unspeakable atrocity at the Gaza hospital, but we do know that hundreds were killed and hundreds more were injured; we do know that yesterday an IDF airstrike hit an UNRWA—United Nations Relief and Works Agency—school where thousands were sheltering, killing more; and we do know that over 3,000 civilians have been killed in Gaza so far. Israel does have the right to self-defence, but that cannot include mass bombing of densely populated areas if Israel is simultaneously to stay within international law. I urge the Secretary of State to think again about the issue of a ceasefire. Of course it would need to be worked for and of course it is going to be hard, but unless the UK Government give their backing to the UN on this issue, thousands more will be killed. We should be on the right side of history and I am very much afraid right now that we will not be.

**James Cleverly:** Israel is one of the parties engaged in this military operation, but there are others, including Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. I suggest that anybody calling on Israel to cease military operations should at least—at least—call on the terrorists to do likewise.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): As hospitals are targeted, medical relief organisations are desperately trying to evacuate sick and wounded patients to increasingly fewer places of safety, while protecting the dedicated staff looking after them. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm how many functioning hospitals are left in Gaza and how Palestinians who continue to be targeted by bombardments are supposed to receive lifesaving medical treatment?

**James Cleverly:** The simple truth of the matter is that I do not know the status of the medical facilities in Gaza. We want them to be protected—we have made that clear, and we will continue to do so in all future engagements and conversations we have with Israel. We will, of course, call on Hamas and the other terrorist organisations to remove themselves from the proximity of those hospitals if they are conducting military operations.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): The UN reports that the last water treatment desalination plant in Gaza has shut down. At the same time, people are drinking contaminated tap water and polluted sea water. The World Health Organisation says that people need 15 litres of water a day and people in Gaza are surviving on three. Can the Foreign Secretary tell me what practical steps are being taken to ensure the resumption of fuel supplies to water treatment works in Gaza?

**James Cleverly:** The situation with regard to the provision of electricity, gas and water from Israel to Gaza is of course important. We have spoken with Israel about this. The hon. Gentleman makes the point that Gaza did have its own water production capabilities. We saw videos posted by Hamas proudly demonstrating how water pipes, funded by European aid, were being ripped up and turned into rockets to fire into Israel. Although of course we speak with Israel about support to the Palestinians in Gaza, and our own support to the Palestinians in Gaza, we must not overlook the fact that Hamas has habitually persecuted, punished and oppressed the Palestinian people in Gaza.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): We have already seen one Iranian terror proxy, Hamas, launch attacks against Israel in the past 11 days, but we know that another Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, is waiting in the wings to attack Israel from the north—indeed, this may have already started. What steps are the Government taking to deter Hezbollah from seeking to attack or otherwise undermine Israel at this most difficult time?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. The United States of America and the United Kingdom have put naval assets in the eastern Mediterranean, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions. That is not to conduct military operations; it is to conduct surveillance operations to prevent Iran, or indeed anyone else, from supplying Hezbollah with lethal aid that might be used against Israel.

**Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): In recognising Israel's right to self-defence against Hamas's brutal terrorism, the Government have rightly cited international humanitarian law. However, it seems to be the position of the Government that it has so far not yet been

broken. Indeed, today the Foreign Secretary has several times cited President Herzog to that effect. By contrast, we have a number of UN agencies and actors, non-governmental organisations and international lawyers all saying that collective punishment is a clear breach of international humanitarian law, including, for example, the cutting off of supplies and the forced movement of people. Frankly, forcing people to leave their homes or hospitals because they are under threat of bombing is forced movement. How does the Foreign Secretary address those contradictions in the UK Government's position?

**James Cleverly:** There are no contradictions in the UK Government's position. I have set out the Government's position. The hon. Gentleman may disagree with it and others may disagree with it, but there are no contradictions.

**Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The terror attack on Israeli citizens and the subsequent abduction was brutal and evil. The scenes from Al-Ahli hospital last night on the television were beyond comprehension and upsetting, and it goes without saying that we have to do everything we can to stop the impending humanitarian crisis in Gaza from happening. But I am really concerned—I am sure the Foreign Secretary is—that the conflict between Israel and Hamas does not spill over into the streets of any community in the United Kingdom. My home city, Manchester, is welcoming of Muslim and Jew alike. What more are the Government doing to ensure that the catastrophe in the middle east does not end up on the streets of Britain?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. I can give him and the House our commitment to protect all communities in the United Kingdom. No one should be held responsible for actions happening thousands of miles away. They have an absolute right to live in peace and security here in the UK. The Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the rest of the Government are absolutely committed to doing everything we can to protect all people, of whatever faith or community, here in the UK.

**Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): Fourteen hundred years on from Cáin Adomnáin, the law of the innocents to protect women and children in conflict, both the terror of Hamas and the utterly disproportionate and illegal response by Israel stain our modern world. Rather than the supine acceptance of Israeli-US policy, will the Secretary of State instead heed the wise counsel of President Higgins of Ireland and seek both an immediate ceasefire and justice for the Palestinian people?

**James Cleverly:** UK foreign policy is set in London, not in Washington and not in Dublin.

**Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary has talked about accountability and accuracy in broadcasts and social media. Does he share my bafflement at why the BBC, our national broadcaster, has repeatedly refused to describe Hamas as a terrorist organisation when they are a proscribed terrorist group?

**James Cleverly:** I am genuinely baffled by this. I understand that the BBC says that to do so would be to take sides, but I fundamentally disagree with that.

The BBC has used the word “terrorist” on a number of occasions, both domestically and internationally, and I just do not understand why it cannot bring itself to describe Hamas as terrorists, because that is what they are.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): It is imperative that we get to the bottom of the terrible tragedy that unfolded at the hospital last night, and hold to account whoever was responsible. When I visited the region last year, I saw and heard just how difficult it is to supply medical care to the Palestinians. Hospitals across Gaza now face running out of food, fuel and water, and several have been given evacuation orders which, according to the World Health Organisation, patients will not survive. May I urge the Foreign Secretary once again to join the United Nations in calling for the immediate resumption of essential supplies to Gaza in line with international humanitarian law, which he says he keeps calling for?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady has repeated a question that has been asked in the House a number of times, and she will have heard the answers that I have given on each of those occasions.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The grief and loss of millions in Gaza and in Israel have only been added to by the horrific and heinous attack on Al-Ahli Hospital. I was pleased that both the Foreign Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary reiterated our commitment to international law and the importance of bringing those who commit war crimes to justice while also not rushing to judgment. We have our own staff and international humanitarian agencies on the ground in hospitals in Gaza. What is the Foreign Secretary doing to ensure that those hospitals can carry on treating innocent civilians, working with the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the hospitals themselves?

**James Cleverly:** We do of course speak with Israel, and, as I have said, we call on the Israelis to employ the professionalism of which they are understandably proud to minimise civilian casualties and to ensure that, where possible, civilian infrastructure—particularly schools, hospitals and religious sites—is not damaged. However, it is not by accident that Hamas habitually embed their terrorist operations in those very places, making the lives of Palestinians inevitably far more dangerous than they would be otherwise.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I commend the UK Government for the announcement of an extra £10 million of aid for Gaza, but that will be of no use to the civilians who are trapped and injured there if it just piles up at the border. What analysis have the Foreign Secretary’s officials conducted of the legality of the Israeli authorities’ order to restrict supplies of water, food, fuel and electricity to Gaza, and the legality of their order to 1.1 million Palestinian civilians in northern Gaza to evacuate and travel south? Those are questions of legality, Foreign Secretary.

**James Cleverly:** The hon. and learned Lady will know that legal advice within the Department is for Ministers, to inform our decision making. The broader point is

that we do of course want to end the suffering that Palestinians are experiencing, and the best way of doing that is to remove the yoke of Hamas from their shoulders—which is why we support, within the framework of international law, Israel’s right to self-defence.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Hundreds of my constituents have written to me expressing horror at the attacks that have happened in Israel and, now, at the unfolding catastrophe in Gaza. One of them has 25 family members in Gaza.

Al-Ahli is one of 22 hospitals in northern Gaza. In view of the hundreds killed last night, the children writing their names on the palms of their hands, and the mothers giving birth in the street as their homes are destroyed and their hospitals damaged, can the Foreign Secretary update the House on the action being taken with international partners now to ensure that hospitals and medical staff are being protected, given that he said earlier today that he was not sure of the situation relating to hospitals? It is estimated that there are 50,000 mothers in Gaza, including pregnant mothers. Will the Foreign Secretary update us on whether there is a plan for their healthcare, and on whether he is confident that that is being dealt with and urgently needed medical and humanitarian supplies are getting through?

**James Cleverly:** As I said earlier, in a fast-evolving situation during a conflict such as this, it is extremely difficult to conduct an up-to-date assessment of the ability of medical facilities in Gaza to maintain operations. We do of course want civilians and civilian infrastructure to be protected wherever possible, and we have communicated that to Israel, but let me say again that protecting them is made infinitely more difficult in these circumstances, because Hamas and other terrorist organisations specifically embed themselves in civilian infrastructure. That is a long-standing habit of such organisations.

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s recognition of the need to exercise caution before leaping to conclusions, given the difficulty of verifying information in situations of crisis, but will he commit himself to personally making contact with different social media and technology companies, urging them directly to help prevent the spread of disinformation and prevent any information war relating to this horrific situation?

**James Cleverly:** I will not commit myself to doing that personally, but I know that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport takes this issue extremely seriously. We are, of course, taking action to try to improve professionalism on social media platforms, and while I personally will not be making that contact directly, I know that it is being done, and will continue to be done, by the Government.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): At this tragic time, I am driven by my desire for peace and the protection of innocents. While this tragic war continues, will the Foreign Secretary do everything he can to ensure that international law is followed? That, of course, includes the protection of hospitals, medical professionals, civilians and humanitarian aid for Gaza. However, this war will only end through

[Emma Hardy]

dialogue, so will the Foreign Secretary also do everything he can to keep the flame of hope for a negotiated peace settlement alive? Will he make that a priority for his Government, even when, at times, it seems such a very distant hope?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady is entirely right about the need for us not to lose our desire to bring genuine, sustainable peace. As I have said, in these particularly difficult times that may seem a very far-off and, indeed, impossible aspiration, but we will remain relentlessly focused on bringing a lasting, sustainable peace to the Israeli and the Palestinian people, and indeed to the wider region. I can give the hon. Lady the assurance that while dealing with the immediate challenges, we will also keep that long-term aspiration at the forefront of our minds.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Will the British Government support Brazil's motion calling for a humanitarian ceasefire, on which the UN Security Council will vote later today? If not, what are the grounds for not supporting it, given that the Brazilian text includes criticism of Hamas whereas the Russian text debated on Monday did not? If Hamas refuse to honour the ceasefire, as the Foreign Secretary fears, will they not be seen by the eyes of the world as not protecting the people whom they purport to represent?

**James Cleverly:** I have spoken to the Brazilian Foreign Minister about the text of the Security Council resolution, and we are liaising closely with the Brazilians and others, but I will not be able to give a commitment on our voting decision until the text is closed and the negotiations have been concluded.

**Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): When I visited Israel and Palestine three weeks ago with a group of MPs, we met aid workers and health workers who say their last goodbyes to their families every morning because they do not know whether they will return. There is an urgent need to support them, and the UK public are being very generous in response to appeals. In the absence of humanitarian corridors—and I support him in arguing for them—can the Foreign Secretary update the House on efforts to work with UK-based agencies that are on the ground in Gaza to support the provision of mobile health clinics, medicines, food and water there?

**James Cleverly:** The distribution plan for the initial £10 million that the Prime Minister announced on Monday is still being worked on, but I can assure the hon. Lady that we have very close relationships with non-governmental organisations and aid organisations based in the UK and operating in Gaza and the region. We will of course be liaising with them both in terms of getting an updated understanding of the situation on the ground and of maximising our support to the Palestinian people.

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): The most urgent priority must be to prevent the loss of any more civilian lives. To do so, the UN General Secretary has called for an immediate ceasefire. Leading humanitarian agencies such as Oxfam have also called for that. Surely the

Government must add their voice to that. Does the Foreign Secretary accept that, if they do not, many thousands more will die? Will he also withdraw his earlier remark that what is going on is not forced relocation? If he does not, I believe that he will come to regret that remark.

**James Cleverly:** Of course all of us want to see an end to the lives that have been lost, but we also recognise that Israel feels the need to take action to protect the lives of its citizens from the attacks emanating from Hamas and other terrorist organisations in Gaza. We have always said that, in our support for that activity, we call upon it to abide by humanitarian law, as its President has committed to doing.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): We need swift confirmation of who is responsible for the devastating attack on the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, but the immediate priority is humanitarian support for those affected. The £10 million pledged by the UK Government is genuinely welcome, but can the Foreign Secretary explain how that aid is going to get to those affected, when Israel has closed all humanitarian corridors?

**James Cleverly:** The situation at the moment is that all humanitarian support going into Gaza is severely limited. There was an open, fluid border between Israel and Gaza, and tens of thousands of Palestinians from Gaza—tens of thousands of Gazans—worked in Israel daily and moved to and fro between Gaza and Israel. That crossing had to be closed, as did the Rafah crossing into Egypt, in response to the terrorist attacks that were perpetrated against Israel. We are working with the Israeli Government, the Egyptian Government and the international community to try to open up humanitarian corridors and we will continue to do so.

**Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): The level of conflicting information and indeed disinformation coming from Gaza, and the irresponsible reporting of this as fact, including that coming from the BBC yesterday, is surely something that we should be condemning. What are the Foreign Secretary and his Department doing to correct this approach from broadcasters? Will he join me in saying the blame should not be cast until all the facts are known, especially to avoid inflaming tensions both here and in the middle east?

**James Cleverly:** This applies to us all, and particularly to broadcasters that have a high level of international standing. I am a big fan of the BBC and I know the huge influence that the voice of the BBC has internationally. Because of that influence, it is incredibly important that the BBC and other broadcasters are very careful in the reporting of this issue, because of the sensitivity and because of the implications not just in the region itself but here in the UK. That is a general plea to all broadcasters.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I represent a significant number of Jewish and Muslim constituents, many of whom have links to Israel and Palestine. My constituents are devastated and deeply concerned about the innocent civilians caught up in this horror and worried about the implications closer to home. The sights that we have seen overnight are horrifying. I will



not ask the Foreign Secretary for facts that he does not yet have, but we saw this human tragedy unfold further overnight, so I am asking for clear assurances on deliverable humanitarian aid now. It is reasonable that we ask him to look as hard as possible at a ceasefire, which would of course apply to all parties, because the innocent civilians in the region have to be our immediate priority. Can he also comment on the need for urgent international work towards a peaceful long-term solution for the region? The Israeli and Palestinian people deserve a bit more of a refocus on their long-term peace.

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady speaks with great passion, which I know is genuine. When I was first appointed to the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office in February 2020, I was the Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, and I can assure her that I have been personally focused on trying to find a resolution to this long-standing and painful issue the entire time I have been a Minister in the foreign service. I can assure her that the Government remain focused on that long-term peaceful resolution to this terrible situation. I can also assure her that we want to see the money that we have allocated actually turned into humanitarian support for the Palestinian people. That of course means having humanitarian access, but that is not happening at the moment. We will continue to use all our diplomatic effort to try to unlock those humanitarian access routes.

**Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op):** Residents in Walthamstow are mourning the loss of all civilian lives in this conflict. It is very personal to them. Rania and Sharone are two Walthamstow residents. Sharone is here at the moment meeting the Prime Minister about her parents who have been kidnapped by Hamas. Rania and seven members of her family are stuck in Gaza trying desperately to get out. I want to put on record our thanks to the Foreign Secretary and his officers for what they have done so far, but Sharone desperately needs help to get more information, from whatever parties or third-party agencies, about her parents and the medical welfare, and Rania is desperate to get her family back home to us in Walthamstow, but there is misinformation on the ground as well. Has the Foreign Secretary also considered whether the Kerem Shalom border could be looked at as one way to get humanitarian aid into Gaza to help those affected by this crisis and to bring our people home?

**James Cleverly:** I want to commend the work of our consular team that is dealing with families who are suffering loss, who are grieving and who are deeply fearful for the welfare of their families and loved ones overseas. I know that the hon. Lady and other hon. and right hon. Members will have constituents who are deeply fearful about what is going on. I would urge them all to use the consular contact details that have been provided, and I am more than happy to make sure that they are circulated to anyone who does not have them. We maintain contact with all those families who have got in contact with us and we try to maintain contact with those British nationals who are currently stuck in Gaza. I can give the hon. Lady and the House

an absolute assurance that we will not rest and we will not step back from our duty to support British nationals overseas.

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** I have had many hundreds of emails over the past few days from constituents who are deeply distressed at the ongoing loss of human life in the middle east. I have been moved by the stories from many of the medical professionals on the ground in Gaza who have not only run out of medical supplies, including painkillers, but have no water with which to carry out their job. When can they expect to receive those essential items?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady asks a pertinent and important question. At this stage, I am not able to give her any credible assurances on the timescales around this. Obviously, we are working with the international community and the countries in the region to try to get humanitarian access. We have set aside the money, as the Prime Minister said at Prime Minister's questions earlier today, and we have forward-loaded some of our experts to ensure that any opportunity to provide humanitarian support can be utilised at very short notice, but the truth is that I am not able to give her assurances on timescales.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** The House is grateful to the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues for being here for an hour and a half. There are a great many questions to be asked, and I am glad that today everybody who wished to ask questions on behalf of their constituents has had the opportunity to do so. Let nobody doubt the fact that every Member of this House thinks this is a most serious and sad situation.

## BILLS PRESENTED

### INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Fiona Bruce, supported by Dame Andrea Leadsom, Sarah Champion, Sir Desmond Swayne, Sir Stephen Timms, Jim Shannon, Miriam Cates, Dr Lisa Cameron, Tim Farron, Bob Blackman, Caroline Lucas and Taiwo Owatemi, presented a Bill to require the Prime Minister to appoint a Special Envoy for International Freedom of Religion or Belief; to establish an Office of the Special Envoy; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 373).*

### GOVERNMENT OF WALES (REFERENDUM ON DEVOLUTION) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Mr Rob Roberts presented a Bill to make provision for a referendum on devolution in Wales; to provide that no further such referendum may take place within twenty five years; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 374).*

## Brain Tumours

*Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

2.10 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to set a target for the number of glioblastoma patients who take part in clinical trials each year; to require training for medical oncologists to include training relating to brain cancers; to provide that any drug that has been licensed for use on tumours must be trialled on people with brain tumours; to make provision in relation to neuro-oncology multidisciplinary teams in the NHS, including a requirement that each such team must include a medical oncologist; to require manufacturers of drugs licensed to treat tumours to make those drugs available in specified circumstances for clinical trials relating to brain tumours; and for connected purposes.

I hope the House will hear me today, because I have made this speech before and have absolutely no doubt that I will make it again. In fact, I will make this speech over and over again until we have turned a corner.

My speech today is about glioblastoma brain tumours. It is the deadly disease that my wonderful sister, Margaret, suffered from for 18 months, and it is a deadly disease with which over 3,200 people are diagnosed every year. For every one of those 3,200 people, there was a time when a doctor sat them down in a room and gave them the bad news—the worst news. I can talk about that because, sadly, I have been in that room with Margaret. What they tell people is that there is no hope. The life expectancy for someone diagnosed with a glioblastoma is, on average, nine months and, after a basic course of treatment, the NHS leaves them to die.

Those who have the money travel abroad for private treatment, safe in the knowledge that the NHS has nothing to offer them. Those who have a support network but who are not rich enough, are forced to crowdfund and to fly thousands of miles to access treatment. The rest, sadly, have to accept their fate. There is no hope. They just have to wait. If they are lucky, they get to nine months.

In March, when I made my first speech about glioblastoma, I felt the same way that I have always felt. I was filled with hopelessness, appalled that the disease has been ignored for so long and left at the bottom of the “too difficult” pile for 30 years. The Government have not touched the sides of the £40 million they allocated for research into glioblastoma. After five years, they have spent just £12 million, a quarter of the amount promised. Universities have ignored glioblastoma for years, too. Glioblastoma is not even on the research agenda. Many universities are focusing their resources on trials on mice, neglecting the 3,200 real people who are crying out for new research and clinical trials.

It is a pretty grim landscape, but it has not been like this for people diagnosed with many other cancers. People with breast, bowel and lung cancers have had the hope of research, clinical trials and funding promises being kept. The Government, universities and pharmaceutical companies have come together to make a concerted effort to change things, and they did.

Just look at what we have done for people with lung cancer. In 2010, only one in 10 people diagnosed with lung cancer survived for five years. By 2020, life expectancy

had doubled. In 2010, 83% of people diagnosed with breast cancer survived for five years. By 2020, 86% got to live for five years. In 2010, 58% of people diagnosed with bowel cancer survived for five years. In 2020, we managed to bring that figure up to 60%. However, for people diagnosed with a glioblastoma, there has been no progress and no hope that things will get better. In 2010, the five-year survival rate for people diagnosed with a glioblastoma was 11.9%. Ten years later, in 2020, the survival rate was almost identical: just 12.9%.

Although the treatment and life expectancy of people diagnosed with a glioblastoma has not changed in 30 years, I feel more hopeful today because, since I made this speech in March, I have met the Minister for Health and Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), and the shadow Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). I have also met clinicians, charities, families and universities, and last week I met representatives of the top pharmaceutical companies in the UK to discuss why we are where we are. Having built up a clearer picture of where we are, I know that if we try something different, we can give people diagnosed with this deadly disease some hope.

So here is something different. First, we need a target of getting 200 glioblastoma patients each year into clinical trials on drugs that have the potential to change the course of the disease. That would be 1,000 patients over the lifetime of a Parliament. With those trials, we could begin to understand what works and what does not.

Secondly, the NHS should take every drug that has already been licensed to deal with other tumours and apply them to clinical trials on glioblastoma brain tumours. That has not yet happened because glioblastoma is a very small target market for the pharmaceutical industry, and such investment is not very profitable. The Government must either encourage or force the pharmaceutical companies to provide the drugs for these trials. Applying those existing drugs would be a cheap way to make a huge difference. It is sometimes the only way that makes a difference. Universities should act as partners in these trials. They should be snapping up the opportunity to carry out research in this area, instead of leaving the field untouched.

Thirdly, the NHS should ensure that every neuro-oncology multidisciplinary team has a medical oncologist who is a core member and is required to attend meetings to discuss patients, so that brain tumour patients are not left in a corner of the ward because there is no specialist arguing for them. Unless a neuro-oncologist is in the room, we will not benefit from their ideas or expertise.

Fourthly, the NHS should require that every doctor training to be a medical oncologist should go through a mandatory course on brain tumours. At the moment, the Royal College of Physicians requires no compulsory training. Doctors have to take two courses on bowel cancer as part of their training, but not a single course on brain tumours. The reason why there is nobody on those wards or in the research infrastructure is because nobody is required to do the training. Who can apply for the research funds if there is nobody in the field?

If we do those four things, we have a chance of some hope. I have not just whisked up this four-point plan; it is the result of meeting experts in the field, including

none other than Dr Paul Mulholland, Europe's leading brain tumour oncologist. If we carry out those four steps, experts think we can drastically improve treatment for everyone diagnosed with a glioblastoma. Some have even said that we could find a cure for glioblastoma within 10 years.

Einstein famously said, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results." That is what we have been doing for the past 30 years with the treatment of glioblastoma. We can do better, and Margaret's legacy demands nothing less.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** The hon. Lady will know that the whole House sends her our sincere sympathy for the loss of her sister, and that we all recognise the courage it takes for her to come to the House to speak about this very difficult subject. When I put the Question, I am not going to call for the "Noes," because I know that nobody will say "No."

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered.*

That Siobhain McDonagh, Tracey Crouch, Greg Smith, Steve Brine, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Mrs Sharon Hodgson, Tony Lloyd, Dame Meg Hillier, Mr Clive Betts, Jon Cruddas, Paul Blomfield and Sarah Owen present the Bill.

Siobhain McDonagh accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 375).*

## ENERGY BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Energy Bill [Lords] for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 9 May 2023 (Energy Bill [Lords] (Programme)):

### *Consideration of Lords Message*

(1) Proceedings on the Lords Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

### *Subsequent stages*

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Andrew Bowie.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Energy Bill [Lords]

### *Consideration of Lords message*

#### Clause 272

#### LOCAL SUPPLY FOR COMMUNITY ENERGY

2.22 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie):** I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 274B. Lords amendment 274B was added to the Bill during consideration in the Lords of Commons amendments. As was set out, the Government did not agree with the inclusion of the amendment and, after further careful consideration, we remain of the same view today. The amendment commits the Government to a consultation "on the barriers preventing the development of community energy schemes"

and sets out whom we would consult. It also commits the Government to bringing forward proposals to remove identified barriers to community energy.

However, as a result of working closely with colleagues who have made representations during the passage of the Bill, on 5 September I set out the Government's commitment to consult on the barriers that the sector faces when developing projects. As a part of that process, we are involving the community energy sector in designing the consultation, through our community energy contact group. The group has already had constructive discussion on this work at its meeting earlier this month. The Government have already made a clear commitment to the consultation—I announced that commitment at the Dispatch Box in September. We therefore think it is unnecessary, and of no additional value, to put the specifics of it in primary legislation.

**Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con):** I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has done to put in place not just this consultation but the fund, which will be tremendously useful for these purposes too. Does he accept that there is a sense of urgency here; that there is a need to get on with removing these barriers? If he is not content with the timetable set out in this amendment, will he give the House an indication of what he thinks the right timetable is, so that community energy companies and others can know where they stand and get on with the good work that he and I are both in favour of?

**Andrew Bowie:** I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his intervention. Of course, I agree with him that pace is of the utmost importance in supporting community energy groups around the country, which is why the contact group has already met earlier this month and is engaging already on identifying the barriers that the consultation will seek to address and, thus, informing the Government as to what we need to do. That work is ongoing, which is why we do not feel that this amendment is required; we have begun that process already.

There are other issues with the amendment that mean we cannot support its inclusion in the Bill. The amendment would place an additional obligation on the Government to bring forward proposals to remove these barriers within a specific timeframe. As I just said, we cannot be

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sure what barriers will be raised in the consultation, or what the proper response to those barriers should be, until we have carried it out. We therefore cannot create a legislative obligation to remove barriers within a six-month timeframe when we are not aware of the nature of the barriers and have not yet properly analysed them.

**Chris Skidmore** (Kingswood) (Con): I appreciate the Minister's argument, but that is technically not what the amendment says; there is no requirement for legislative reform, only one to bring forward proposals. It is unfair to mislead the House—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing)**: Order. It is not misleading the House; the Minister might possibly have done so inadvertently, but he would not have been misleading the House.

**Chris Skidmore**: My apologies to the Minister. I did not mean to make accusations so strongly. The challenge here is that subsection (4) of the new clause set out in the amendment contains no reference to legislation such as the Minister suggested. That is my point.

**Andrew Bowie**: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. It is the Department's view and mine that the amendment would result in legislation being required. As I said, we absolutely understand the importance of this, which is why I launched the consultation process as I did. It is why we are engaging so closely with the sector and all interested parties so that we can get this consultation up and running and out as soon as possible, and identify those barriers preventing community energy groups from accessing the market. I know that he has a passion in this area and holds strong convictions on it. I would be happy to continue to work with him, alongside the community energy contact group, as we develop our proposals for the consultation.

I also wish to reassure the House that we will continue to work closely with the sector to support its important work, both through our existing support, including, for example, the £10 million community energy fund, and in carrying out the consultation, to which we have already committed.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I call the Opposition spokesman.

**Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): That was a disappointing and specious defence by the Minister of his intention not to proceed with these proposals from the other place. He knows perfectly well what the barriers to developing community energy are; we have debated them at length during the passage of the Bill. So I am not sure it is going to take a forensic panel of inquiry to find out what those details are before the Government can act on any of these things.

We are on the last lap of the Energy Bill and it is particularly disappointing that we are hearing what we are hearing today about this Lords amendment. The Bill, which has been with us in both Houses for well over a year now, puts into place many of the essential tools that will enable energy to progress towards a low-carbon, net zero future. The Opposition have consistently supported the Bill, while endeavouring during

its passage to strengthen it in its low carbon mission. We have tried to place into the Bill further elements to make it the best it can be in pursuit of its low-carbon mission, and there have been some junctures during its passage when the Minister has endeavoured to take on board those suggestions for strengthening it, in some instances by drafting a Government amendment that meets the purport of our amendments. I am grateful to the Minister for those changes to the Bill and for the collegiate way in which the Bill has been debated and decided upon.

However, there are exceptions to that, one of which is in front of us today. As the Minister states, it relates to community and local energy, which I am sure Members will agree is and will be an important part of the future low carbon energy landscape. It has the potential to make a serious contribution to our local carbon arsenal of plant, while being funded and supported by the community in which that plant is situated, making it easier to develop and able to restore the benefits of its operation to the community itself.

Labour has committed to providing strong support for community energy, including the assistance of Great British Energy, the company we propose to set up to support the development of local low carbon plant with community energy schemes. The potential for such schemes to contribute to the overall installation of low carbon systems in the UK is immense, with perhaps 8 GW of install capacity added to the national stock through such local schemes. I remind the House that that is getting on towards the equivalent capacity of three nuclear power stations such as Hinkley Point C.

2.30 pm

We know that at the moment there are substantial legislative and administrative obstacles to the development of community energy, most notably the ability of community schemes to trade their output effectively. During the passage of the Bill, we tried to introduce clauses to address those problems. Indeed, when the Bill first came to the House from another place, their lordships had inserted clauses to the Bill to that effect. Unfortunately, the Government deleted them during the Bill's Commons passage.

As I am sure the House will appreciate, their lordships quite rightly feel very strongly about the issue, so they attempted to restore those passages to the Bill when it returned to the Lords for ping pong. However, again, just recently, the Government rejected those proposals.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): One of the barriers will be the shortage of grid and cable capacity to link into. Is the hon. Gentleman envisaging some kind of privileged access or some solution to the grid shortage?

**Dr Whitehead**: That is not quite the subject of our debate, but the right hon. Member can see that we envisage an energetic and far-reaching proposal to develop the grid in such a way that those grid shortages are overcome, so that the grid is able to service the low carbon economy in the way we would all want it to do. In the context of what we are discussing, I remind the right hon. Member that this would be about distributed grids at a local level, rather than the national high-level grids. We need to take further action to strengthen and sort out grids at that level.

The Lords clearly continue to feel strongly about this issue; as we can see, they have sent back to us today a modified version of the original amendment, requiring the Government to consult on changes to assist community energy and, importantly, to set a timeline for proposals to be brought forward to remove barriers to the development of community energy.

Of course, there are others in this House who feel strongly about this issue. The proposals that the Lords have now twice tried to have inserted into the Bill are essentially the wording of a group called Power for the People, which suggested wording for a community energy enabling Bill for which it campaigned to secure signed-up support from parliamentarians. It did indeed secure substantial support from parliamentarians who feel strongly on the issue of community energy. Some 325 Members signed up in support, including 130 Conservative Members and, perhaps most remarkably, 22 members of the Government, including six Treasury Ministers, the present Chancellor and the Minister himself, as I often seek to remind him. There is no lack of support in the House for the principles and practice of community energy.

The Lords amendment seeks to acknowledge and further that support by putting forward very reasonable and, one might have thought, pretty non-contentious wording to add to the Bill. It is inexplicable to me that the Government should seek to resist these proposals in the way they have. Yes, they will say, as the Minister has said, that they have set up a community energy fund of £10 million over two years, which is welcome, and they have verbally indicated that, at some stage, there will be a consultation on barriers to supply, but there are no timelines for that and no commitment to move positively forward from it. That is what this amendment seeks to put right.

As I have said, the Minister appears already to be a signed-up supporter of community energy action, and I would fear for his own emotional wellbeing if he were forced today to perform another policy backflip and acquiesce in yet another Government repudiation of themselves in rejecting this latest Lords amendment. Instead, let us end the extended passage of the Bill on a high note, and all around the House agree on both the importance of community energy and the measures we will need to take to ensure it thrives in the future.

**Chris Skidmore:** I rise in support of the amendment. It is very similar to an amendment that I tabled during the previous stage of the Bill in the Commons. I echo the comments that have been made about the amendment being uncontentious. It calls for additional consultation—if the Government want me to do that, I will do it myself for the community energy groups.

The net zero review held several roundtables with a number of community energy groups across the country. Indeed, they were one of the reasons why pillar 4 in the final report, “Mission Zero: Independent Review of Net Zero”, was

“Net Zero and the Community”.

One of the key findings of the review was that over half of all net zero decisions will need to be taken not by Government or Parliament, but outside this Chamber. We can turbocharge our transition towards net zero if we can empower and support more community energy groups to take the action that needs to be taken.

Indeed, the only single wind turbine that has been built in the United Kingdom in the past year has been delivered through community energy. I am proud that it is in my home city of Bristol. Ambition Lawrence Weston has seen its 4.25 MW turbine built and it will now power 3,500 homes for the community energy project. The £4 million to pay for the project was raised by the group—it did not come cap in hand to Government—and now it will see an economic return of £140,000 a year as a result of the energy that will be sold to the grid. That is just one example of the myriad examples of net zero projects that demonstrate the economic opportunity that net zero can provide.

In Bristol, we also have the Bristol City Leap, which is a result of a £7 million investment from Bristol City Council. There has been £424 million of inward investment from the American company Ameresco Ltd to decarbonise the city’s district heat network. Community energy points the way for demonstrating that net zero is not a cost, despite what some may say, but an opportunity. We must seize that opportunity now, not just to tackle the climate crisis or reach our nationally determined contribution for 2030, because net zero is about 2030 not just about 2050. We cannot keep kicking the can down the road, somehow suggesting we are going to meet our carbon budgets. Meeting them now, today, is absolutely vital to ensure we can meet our climate commitments in future carbon budgets.

Community energy is here and now. We can get on with delivering net zero with the tools and technologies we have, and, above all, with the people we have—individuals and communities across the country. Community Energy England has 220 groups, a third of which would like to build onshore wind turbines, like Ambition Lawrence Weston. They want to get on with it. They are not often being paid to do this; they do it because they recognise what they can return to their communities. As a Conservative who believes in the power of local communities, we as a Government should be supporting local communities to the hilt to deliver on energy action.

When we look at the future of the grid, everything points to the fact that creating flexibilities on the edge of the grid enhances our energy security, allows us to return energy to the grid, frees up energy capacity elsewhere, and frees up our demand on oil and gas elsewhere. This is a no-brainer. I shall support Lords amendment 274B if it is pushed to a vote, although I will not push it to a vote myself. Nevertheless, it is vital that we send a clear message not just that we are committed to the net zero pathway—because it is the right and the economically important thing to do—but that we recognise that, when it comes to net zero, we need a big bang moment. We need to create little platoons of individuals and communities that are going out there writing their own net zero narratives and stories. For that reason, I will be supporting this Lords amendment today.

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

**Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP):** “Specious”, said His Majesty’s Opposition spokesperson about the arguments against this amendment, to which I would add, having listened to the Minister’s defence of the Government’s position on community energy, that it was also one of

[*Dave Doogan*]

the more tendentious arguments that we have heard in this Chamber. I am not convinced that the Minister is absolutely fully signed up to that which he has been put out today to defend. I think he knows the importance of community generation and he is not content with the feet dragging that his Government are forcing him to come here to defend. This is another extremely negative decision by a Government who show no let-up in their disdain for community ambition for disaggregated generation infrastructure, or, in fact, for the climate. If we contrast that ambition with the Tories' now messianic devotion to the cult of nuclear, we see that next year everyone across these islands will be well shot of them, and nowhere more so will that be clear than in the energy space.

Lords amendment 274B is a perfectly sensible ambition. It is a pragmatic amendment by their lordships. It is balanced and deliverable, works with the grain of local ambition, and is destined to unlock significant value in the green transition. It would unlock local enterprise and it would unlock value-add in the real economy and promote community wellbeing. There is nothing not to recommend about this ambition; it is quite clear that it has positives for the people and for our communities. It is no wonder, then, that this Tory Government will reject it out of hand. They have no interest in empowering the people or powering the green revolution. They would rather throw billions on to our energy bills to pay for nuclear, while they proscribed onshore wind in England up until September this year, leaving Scotland to do all the heavy lifting as usual.

Why will these Tories not follow the SNP Scottish Government's lead in this priority? The Scottish Government's community and renewable energy scheme promotes community energy ownership across Scotland. CARES continues to help communities engage, participate in and benefit from the transition to net zero. Since 2010, CARES has offered advice and support to more than 900 organisations and assisted in the delivery of 600 community and locally owned renewable projects throughout Scotland, offering funding in the process of £58 million. Just to clarify, that is just in Scotland, which rather puts in the shade the £10 million on offer from the English Government to English community generation—whenever that happens. CARES accelerates progress towards the Scottish Government's target of 2 GW of renewable energy to be locally or community owned by 2030. The scheme assists in the delivery of both the Scottish Government's energy strategy and heat in buildings strategy through the provision of loan finance, grant funding and specialist advice.

In Scotland, we see a Government of the people working with the people for their shared ambitions, but here in Westminster we see only the veneer of an Administration masking the infighting, bitter division and self-interest of that Tory party.

The Scottish Government's community good practice principles, which have been widely adopted across the renewables industry, promote the provision of community benefits at a national level. They promote the equivalent of £5,000 per installed megawatt per annum, index-linked for the life of the project. Over £22.8 million has been paid out in community benefits to Scottish communities in the 12 months since August 2021. England has a very

similar scheme but—and it is a big Tory-shaped but—as these funds are in the greater part principally born of onshore wind development, and the Tories introduced a de facto ban on onshore wind in 2015, English communities have lost out on millions and millions of pounds in community funding thanks to this dysfunctional UK/English Government.

2.45 pm

The Government's contorted priorities directly increase reliance on insecure and costly gas generation, and they are continuing to persist with the grotesque parody that they are on the side of working people by rowing back further on measures that would save households money and protect our planet by backtracking on home heating, insulation and electric vehicle targets. The Tories are busy damaging communities, damaging investor confidence and damaging the planet.

In the midst of an energy price crisis, when low-cost, clean, home-produced energy has never been more important, there is enormous potential across these islands for growth in small-scale renewable energy generation—especially by community groups that can provide cheaper, greener power and then reinvest the profits locally. Community energy schemes currently generate a mere 0.5% of the UK's electricity—it is depressing. This could grow twentyfold in 10 years, according to studies by the Environmental Audit Committee, but only if we get action from a Westminster Government. We must also bear in mind how much of that 0.5% of community generation is thanks to the foresight and financial investment of the Scottish Government—investment that the Scottish Government must find from elsewhere in their budget, because if the English Government do not spend it, it is not consequentialised.

That energy could power 2.2 million homes and save 2.5 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions a year, while creating over 30,000 jobs. As Members on the Government's own Benches are pointing out, these things are not an impediment to economic growth, but a driver of economic growth. Furthermore, they would reduce dependence on energy imports, all the while reducing reliance on foreign energy.

A functioning UK Government would embrace this remarkable potential, accept the Lords amendment and seek to enable rather than disable local supply. The regulatory barriers that prevent community energy schemes from selling power to local customers are incongruous with both our climate emergency and the scale of current energy prices. The new £10 million community energy fund is nothing but a paltry smokescreen, which will not scratch the surface and is a veil simply for this Tory Government's inaction and hostility to the ambition of the people and their drive for net zero. The Government cannot hold a candle to the Scottish Government's record in this area, but it is high time they at least tried to do so.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** Let us remind ourselves what Lords amendment 247B is about. Within 18 months of the Act being passed, the Secretary of State would be required to carry out a consultation and publish a report on the barriers preventing the development of community energy schemes. It would also require the Government to respond and bring forward proposals to

remove the barriers preventing the development of community energy schemes within six months of the consultation closing. That is the bare minimum that the Government could do. It would at least move the issue forward, and yet the Government still put forward a motion to disagree with it.

The Government say that they have already committed to consult on the barriers to local supply, but we still have not been given a date when that will actually happen. The Lords amendment would stop the Government's current policy of dither and delay and require them to get on with taking community energy schemes forward.

Ultimately, the Government should not need to consult, because they are already well aware of what barriers face the sector; Community Energy England has told them repeatedly over the last five years. It is really disappointing, because there is even an all-party parliamentary group for community energy. Officials have engaged with the APPG, yet nothing has happened because the Government, despite warm words, are not really committed to community energy.

In 2021, the Environmental Audit Committee published a series of recommendations to encourage community energy. The only recommendation taken forward so far is the community energy fund, and even that does not yet have a launch date. I hope that the Minister will tell me when the launch date will be. When will we see the fund for community energy?

We are in the middle of an energy crisis. Bills have skyrocketed. Access to cheap, clean, home-produced energy has never been more vital. We need to secure our energy supply, protect consumers and reach net zero. As we have always said in the debate about reaching net zero, we need to take people with us. That is not about delaying targets, as the Government have just done, but about encouraging people to walk the difficult journey to net zero. Community energy does exactly that. Why are the Government not supporting it with all their might? Why are the Government not even supporting the Lords amendment? It is the bare minimum.

Community energy has the potential to power 2.2 million homes and save 2.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions every year. All it needs is a Government who give it the support that it deserves. I have seen at first hand the benefits that community energy can bring. In my Bath constituency, Bath and West Community Energy has installed enough renewables to power 4,500 homes. It has invested the money that it has earned back into my local community, donating nearly £330,000 to support environmental and fuel poverty schemes. That is what community energy can do. What is there not to support? Why are the Government not committed to doing all that they can to ensure that community energy projects can be delivered?

**John Redwood** *rose*—

**Wera Hobhouse:** Unfortunately, the Government are unwilling to see the potential of community energy. Community energy schemes currently generate just 0.5% of the UK's electricity. That is because—we know all this; we have said it many times—the financial, technical and operational requirements involved in becoming a licensed supplier put initial costs at more than £1 million. That is a massive risk for any new start-up or small scheme.

Any community energy projects such as the one in Bath can exist only because it has reached a certain size. That is one of the problems.

The Government are aware of that fact, but voted to remove Lords amendments to rectify it. The Government need to start matching their supportive words about community energy with action. The most effective step that they could take would be to enable local supply and remove the regulatory barriers that prevent community energy schemes from selling their power to local customers. That could include a community right to connect to the grid ahead of commercial projects that deliver little or no social and community benefit. I am sure that I have answered the question that the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) was about to ask.

Community energy schemes are ready to provide clean, green energy that helps local communities. They are not asking for a huge amount of public money, just for the Government to stop blocking the system. In this time of energy uncertainty, having a reliable local supplier can only be positive. I fully support Lords amendment 274B to hold the Government's feet to the fire on community energy. I urge everyone in this House to do the same.

**Andrew Bowie:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for contributing to this afternoon's debate. I will first respond to some of the comments made by my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan). I know that he does not like it very much, and would like it if it were not the case, but he is absolutely wrong and I have to correct him: this is not the English Government; this is the British Government. We are the Government of the entire United Kingdom—a United Kingdom of which Scotland remains a part and, if the opinion polls are anything to go by, will continue to remain a part of for quite some time.

The hon. Member has an obsession with decrying the nuclear industry as something that the Tories alone are obsessed with. Tell that to the Governments of France, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Canada, the United States of America and more, who are reinvesting and restarting their own civil nuclear industry, as is the Labour Welsh Government, who are very much in favour of further investment in, and development of, nuclear. He raised the lack of funding for community energy projects; £10 million over two years is an incredibly generous offer. That is alongside other UK growth funding such as the UK shared prosperity fund, which community energy groups can access by working in partnership with their local authorities.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) asked when the community energy fund will be launched. It will be launched as soon as possible. We are aiming to launch applications to the fund as soon as we physically can.

My opposite number, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), is right that we have had a productive and constructive relationship when it comes to discussion of the Bill. The 72 hours that we spent together in Committee were beneficial to everybody's health, I am sure, and to the development of Government policy on this matter. We have come some way from where we were when we started discussing how we would support community energy. He rightly praised the role that the sector has played during the

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passage of the Bill. The community energy sector has been incredibly receptive to our commitment to a consultation and to the £10 million fund.

**John Redwood:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Did he notice that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) would not give way? She was arguing—the typical position of her party—that it knew all the answers before the consultation, yet it still wanted a very long, drawn-out consultation to avoid doing the answers.

**Andrew Bowie:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I also noticed that—

**Wera Hobhouse:** Will the Minister give way?

**Andrew Bowie:** Two seconds. I will respond to the first intervention before I give way to the hon. Lady. I also noticed that she managed to answer a question that had not even been asked by my right hon. Friend.

**Wera Hobhouse:** The amendment also says that the Government should respond to the barriers and put forward proposals. That is really what we want to know: what is the response to any consultation? The Government have failed to give any response to that.

**Andrew Bowie:** We cannot respond to a consultation that has not been launched yet. We are in the process right now of working with the community energy contact group. In fact, it has already met. Work is under way right now to develop the consultation, identify what the barriers to market are, and get out there and support the community energy sector, as the Government are determined to do.

**Dave Doogan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Andrew Bowie:** Yes, of course—I am delighted to give way.

**Dave Doogan:** The Minister is very kind. He was re-emphasising the importance of the £10 million community energy investment that he is making in England over two years. The Scottish Government have been investing £5.5 million every year for the last 13 years. If he thinks that his investment is outstanding, how would he characterise the Scottish Government's investment?

**Andrew Bowie:** I welcome all Governments' investment in support of community energy projects across the United Kingdom, but this is a sharp change from the last time the hon. Member came to this place, when he was decrying the fact that we were not extending community energy packages across the United Kingdom. I think I had to inform and educate him that there was already a community benefits package in Scotland, operated by the Scottish Government. Yes, there are problems with that scheme, and we will learn from the difficulties that it has faced. That is why I am so sure that the scheme that we are launching—the £10 million to support community energy projects the length and breadth of the country—is the right one, working in tandem with

the funds that are already available north of the border for community energy projects in my constituency and, indeed, in his.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test spoke about previous amendments on community energy. We have been clear that they would not provide the best outcomes for consumers. A right to local supply already exists, and Ofgem has existing flexibility to award supply licences that are restricted to certain geographies. We continue to believe that it is a commercial matter left to suppliers.

Lastly, I turn to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore). Six months may be too soon, frankly, to adequately analyse the outcomes of the consultation. It must fully take into consideration wider interdependencies in the energy system. We will always aim to respond in a timely manner, but I would not want to put a strict timeframe in legislation.

The Government support our route to net zero. The Government are taking action to ensure that we are more energy secure and energy independent, and the Government are supporting community energy projects the length and breadth of the country. For that reason, we should disagree to the Lords amendment before us.

*Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 274B.*

*The House divided: Ayes 293, Noes 181.*

**Division No. 346]**

**[2.59**

#### AYES

Afolami, Bim	Bruce, Fiona
Afriyie, Adam	Buchan, Felicity
Aldous, Peter	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Allan, Lucy ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones</i> )	Burghart, Alex
Anderson, Lee	Butler, Rob
Anderson, Stuart	Cairns, rh Alun
Andrew, rh Stuart	Cameron, Dr Lisa
Ansell, Caroline	Carter, Andy
Argar, rh Edward	Cartledge, James
Atherton, Sarah	Cash, Sir William
Atkins, Victoria	Cates, Miriam
Bacon, Gareth	Caulfield, Maria
Badenoch, rh Kemi	Chalk, rh Alex
Bailey, Shaun	Chishti, Rehman
Baillie, Siobhan	Chope, Sir Christopher
Baker, Duncan	Clark, rh Greg
Baldwin, Harriett	Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Baron, Mr John	Clarke, Theo
Baynes, Simon	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Bell, Aaron	Clarkson, Chris
Benton, Scott	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Beresford, Sir Paul	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Berry, rh Sir Jake	Colburn, Elliot
Bhatti, Saqib	Collins, Damian
Blackman, Bob	Costa, Alberto
Blunt, Crispin	Courts, Robert
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Coutinho, rh Claire
Bowie, Andrew	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Bradley, rh Karen	Crabb, rh Stephen
Brady, Sir Graham	Crosbie, Virginia
Braverman, rh Suella	Crouch, Tracey
Brereton, Jack	Daly, James
Bridgen, Andrew	Davies, rh David T. C.
Brine, Steve	Davies, Gareth
Bristow, Paul	Davies, Dr James
Britcliffe, Sara	Davies, Mims
Browne, Anthony	Davies, Philip
	Davis, rh Mr David



Davison, Dehenna  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Dines, Miss Sarah  
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan  
 Donelan, rh Michelle (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Double, Steve  
 Doyle-Price, Jackie  
 Drummond, Mrs Flick  
 Duguid, David  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Dunne, rh Philip  
 Eastwood, Mark  
 Edwards, Ruth  
 Ellis, rh Sir Michael  
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias  
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie  
 Eustice, rh George  
 Evennett, rh Sir David  
 Everitt, Ben  
 Fabricant, Michael  
 Farris, Laura  
 Fell, Simon  
 Firth, Anna  
 Fletcher, Katherine  
 Fletcher, Mark  
 Fletcher, Nick  
 Ford, rh Vicky  
 Foster, Kevin  
 Fox, rh Dr Liam  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Freeman, George  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Gibb, rh Nick  
 Gibson, Peter  
 Gideon, Jo  
 Girvan, Paul  
 Glen, rh John  
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert  
 Gove, rh Michael  
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Grayling, rh Chris  
 Green, Chris  
 Green, rh Damian  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Grundy, James  
 Halfon, rh Robert  
 Hall, Luke  
 Hancock, rh Matt  
 Harper, rh Mr Mark  
 Harris, Rebecca  
 Harrison, Trudy  
 Hart, Sally-Ann  
 Hart, rh Simon  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
 Henderson, Gordon  
 Henry, Darren  
 Higginbotham, Antony  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Hollobone, Mr Philip  
 Holloway, Adam  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Howell, John  
 Howell, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil

Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Hunt, Tom  
 Jack, rh Mr Alister  
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Jenkinson, Mark  
 Jenkyns, Dame Andrea  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Johnson, Gareth  
 Johnston, David  
 Jones, Andrew  
 Jones, rh Mr David  
 Jones, Fay  
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus  
 Jupp, Simon  
 Kearns, Alicia  
 Keegan, rh Gillian  
 Knight, rh Sir Greg  
 Kniveton, Kate  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi  
 Lamont, John  
 Latham, Mrs Pauline  
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewer, Andrew  
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon  
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian  
 Loder, Chris  
 Logan, Mark  
 Longhi, Marco  
 Lopez, Julia (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Lopresti, Jack  
 Lord, Mr Jonathan  
 Loughton, Tim  
 Mackrory, Cherilyn  
 Maclean, Rachel  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mangnall, Anthony  
 Mann, Scott  
 Marson, Julie  
 May, rh Mrs Theresa  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Paul  
 McCartney, Jason  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 Menzies, Mark  
 Mercer, rh Johnny  
 Merriman, Huw  
 Metcalfe, Stephen  
 Millar, Robin  
 Mills, Nigel  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Damien  
 Mordaunt, rh Penny  
 Morris, David  
 Morris, James  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Mortimer, Jill  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Mumby-Croft, Holly  
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Neill, Sir Robert  
 Nici, Lia  
 Nokes, rh Caroline  
 Norman, rh Jesse

O'Brien, Neil  
 Offord, Dr Matthew  
 Pawsey, Mark  
 Penrose, John  
 Percy, Andrew  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Poulter, Dr Dan  
 Pow, Rebecca  
 Prentis, rh Victoria  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Pursglove, Tom  
 Quin, rh Jeremy  
 Raab, rh Dominic  
 Randall, Tom  
 Redwood, rh John  
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob  
 Richards, Nicola  
 Robertson, Mr Laurence  
 Robinson, Gavin  
 Ross, Douglas  
 Rowley, Lee  
 Russell, Dean  
 Rutley, David  
 Saxby, Selaine  
 Scully, Paul  
 Seely, Bob  
 Selous, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Sharma, rh Sir Alok  
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec  
 Smith, rh Chloe  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, Henry  
 Smith, rh Julian  
 Smith, Royston  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, rh Mark  
 Stafford, Alexander  
 Stephenson, rh Andrew  
 Stevenson, Jane  
 Stevenson, John  
 Stewart, rh Bob

Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Ali, Tahir  
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
 Amesbury, Mike  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Ashworth, rh Jonathan  
 Bardell, Hannah  
 Beckett, rh Margaret  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Blackman, Kirsty  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blomfield, Paul  
 Bonnar, Steven  
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
 Brennan, Kevin  
 Brock, Deidre  
 Brown, Alan  
 Brown, Ms Lyn  
 Bryant, Sir Chris  
 Buck, Ms Karen  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, rh Liam  
 Cadbury, Ruth

Stewart, Iain  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Sturdy, Julian  
 Sunderland, James  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Syms, Sir Robert  
 Thomas, Derek  
 Throup, Maggie  
 Timpson, Edward  
 Tolhurst, rh Kelly  
 Tomlinson, Justin  
 Tomlinson, Michael  
 Trott, Laura  
 Tuckwell, Steve  
 Tugendhat, rh Tom  
 Vara, rh Shailesh  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Villiers, rh Theresa  
 Walker, Sir Charles  
 Walker, Mr Robin  
 Warman, Matt  
 Whately, Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)  
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
 Whittaker, rh Craig  
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John  
 Wiggan, Sir Bill  
 Wild, James  
 Williams, Craig  
 Wilson, rh Sammy  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wragg, Mr William  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Young, Jacob  
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Amanda Solloway and**  
**Robert Largan**

#### NOES

Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Carden, Dan  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Chapman, Douglas  
 Cherry, Joanna  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Crawley, Angela  
 Creasy, Stella  
 Cruddas, Jon  
 Cummins, Judith  
 Cunningham, Alex  
 Daby, Janet  
 Davey, rh Ed  
 David, Wayne  
 Davies-Jones, Alex  
 Day, Martyn  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Debbonaire, Thangam  
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin  
 Dodds, Anneliese  
 Doogan, Dave  
 Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)

Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Duffield, Rosie  
 Dyke, Sarah  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Edwards, Jonathan  
 Elliott, Julie  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Fellows, Marion  
 Flynn, Stephen  
 Foord, Richard  
 Fovargue, Yvonne  
 Foy, Mary Kelly  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gibson, Patricia  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Grady, Patrick  
 Grant, Peter  
 Green, Sarah  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Greenwood, Margaret  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Hamilton, Mrs Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hendrick, Sir Mark  
 Hendry, Drew  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hobhouse, Wera  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hosie, rh Stewart  
 Howarth, rh Sir George  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, Darren  
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Kane, Mike  
 Keeley, Barbara

Khan, Afzal  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Chris  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Linden, David  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan  
 Madders, Justin  
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
 Mahmood, Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 McCabe, Steve  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorrin, Anna  
 Mearns, Ian  
 Miliband, rh Edward  
 Monaghan, Carol  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Murray, James  
 Newlands, Gavin  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote  
 cast by Marion Fellows*)  
 Norris, Alex  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Oswald, Kirsten  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Phillipson, Bridget

Pollard, Luke  
 Powell, Lucy  
 Reed, Steve  
 Rees, Christina  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, rh Rachel  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
 Saville Roberts, rh  
 Liz  
 Sheerman, Mr Barry  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Skidmore, rh Chris  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Spellar, rh John  
 Stephens, Chris  
 Stevens, Jo  
 Stone, Jamie

Streeting, Wes  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tarry, Sam  
 Thewliss, Alison  
 Thompson, Owen  
 Thomson, Richard  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Webbe, Claudia  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Whitehead, Dr Alan  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Williams, Hywel  
 Wilson, Munira  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Kim Leadbeater and  
 Christian Wakeford**

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Lords amendment 274B disagreed to.*

*Ordered,* That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendment 274B;

That Andrew Bowie, Joy Morrissey, Mark Jenkinson, Chris Clarkson, Dr Alan Whitehead, Christian Wakeford and Dave Doogan be members of the Committee;

That Andrew Bowie be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Julie Marson.*)

*Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.*

## Civil Aviation

3.15 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman):** I beg to move,

That the draft Airports Slot Allocation (Alleviation of Usage Requirements) (No. 2) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 18 July, be approved.

To the casual and untutored eye, this might seem a very small piece of legislation to bring to the Floor of the House of Commons. However, it is not only important to the sector but a useful illustration of the work of Ministers and parliamentarians in Committee, so it is nice to have a chance to focus on these quite technical and not especially controversial regulations.

The regulations will be made under powers conferred by the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021, which also rejoices in the name ATMUA. Following the UK's departure from the European Union, that legislation created a more flexible set of powers for Ministers to implement alleviation measures for aircraft slots related to the impacts of covid-19, subject to a vote in both Houses. That allows the UK to adapt its approach so as to minimise disruption to consumers and support the recovery of the aviation sector. Under ordinary circumstances, airlines must operate aircraft slots 80% of the time to retain the right to those same slots the following year—that is known as the 80:20 rule, or the “use it or lose it” rule. It is designed to encourage a more efficient use of scarce airport capacity. As a result of the effect of covid-19 on air travel demand, however, alleviation from the rule has been provided since summer 2020.

The Department has seen a strong recovery in passenger demand during 2023, but there remains uncertainty and a lack of resilience in the industry, and demand on some routes remains below the levels seen before the pandemic. Those factors affect both demand, such as the number of returning passengers, as well as supply, such as aircraft availability and staffing. They add to what has been termed the long “covid tail” in rebuilding resilience in the sector. Thus, aircraft that were out of service during the pandemic now spend much longer in maintenance and overhaul than would normally be the case. That phenomenon is compounded by difficulties stemming from the pandemic, which have affected access to spare parts through global supply chains. Although the industry has taken steps to address those challenges, they are expected to remain an issue during 2024.

The Government have therefore designed a package of measures for the winter 2023 season to mitigate the adverse effects of that loss of resilience. The normal 80:20 rule on slots usage has been retained. However, it has been combined with some limited flexibility through a small pre-season hand-back allowance and a continuation of the previously adopted measures on the justified non-utilisation of slots. The Government have focused the measures on a return to business as usual. We are mindful of the need to balance supporting the sector through sensible and proportionate measures to aid its recovery and protecting consumers from disruption, with the need to avoid excessive alleviation, which could distort competition.

There are two key provisions. The enhanced justified non-utilisation of slots provisions were first introduced for winter 2022. They act as a safety net for airlines if

new restrictions are introduced and they can justify not using slots. They protect the airlines' historic rights to slots in scenarios in which any reintroduced covid-19 measures might severely reduce demand or the viability of a route. However, for any requests for justified non-utilisation of slots, a rationale must be given to the independent co-ordinator for assessment of its merits against the provisions.

The second provision is a limited slots hand-back. For this winter season, the Government will again allow carriers to claim alleviation on up to 5% of their slots at any airport handed back before the start of the season, as was done for this summer. The Government have offered that opportunity in the expectation that the industry will deliver a realistic schedule for winter 2023, thereby minimising last-minute cancellations and delays. The opportunity to hand back slots before the start of the season has been particularly useful in ensuring that airlines deliver a robust schedule, and has helped to provide certainty to consumers that scheduled flights will operate. The measures will cover the winter 2023 season. The Department for Transport is considering whether further alleviation may be required for future seasons.

Through these measures, the Government aim to strike a balance between supporting the sector and minimising disruption to consumers while encouraging recovery and ensuring the efficient use of slots.

3.20 pm

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Minister said that the regulations before the House are a small piece of legislation. He is right, and scholars of Parliament will look back at this motion coming to the Floor of the House as a strange occurrence. Usually, we are up in the gods in this place, in a draughty, dusty Committee room off a long corridor in this great edifice, but this Government have run out of legislation to consider in those Committee rooms, and have to bring this to the Floor of the House. They have run out of time, and they are fast running out of track.

When we talk about the general demise of transport in the United Kingdom, we can see that the Government came to Manchester to cancel HS2—they cancelled it to my city in my city. They announced a tram to my constituency that was opened in 2014, and they launched Network North, which sounds like a dodgy 1970s ITV franchise and was done on the back of a fag packet. The industry was not impressed by the fact that the Secretary of State—who is not here—was making up conspiracy theories on the floor of the conference hall about 20 mph zones and 15-minute cities.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is very generous in giving way, but can I ask him what part of his speech is to do with slots and aviation?

**Mike Kane:** I am coming on to that. This is about the general demise of transport—about abandoning the centre ground and abandoning an industry. We do not even have a Minister for aviation or for maritime in the House of Commons, whereas we in Labour support aviation and maritime to the hilt. When the Secretary of State was making up those conspiracy theories, the Minister—who is so keen on active travel: he walks the

[Mike Kane]

walk, talks the talk, and rides his bike as well—must have had his head in his hands. We in Labour offer industry reassurance and hope that things will get better.

To respond to the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), let us talk about the motion at hand. As we know, the “use it or lose it” rule was relaxed throughout the pandemic: it was dropped to 70:30 to ensure that no environmentally damaging ghost flights were taking off. That was the right decision. Slots are commercially important and highly prized by airlines, giving them a monopoly on a route. Since the pandemic, there has been a strong recovery in passenger numbers and we are all grateful for that. However, the aviation industry can still exhibit a lack of resilience and some uncertainty at times and some routes are still not yet at capacity.

The pandemic has left airlines and airports with little resilience and tight staffing numbers and, as the Minister has mentioned, there are issues with aircraft availability and the global supply chain. With the benefit of hindsight, the Government’s failure to support our world-class aviation sector during the pandemic has led us here. We, as well as workforce representatives and unions, warned the Government that, if tens of thousands of skilled, trained workers were sacked or let go during the pandemic, it would be nigh on impossible to get back up to full speed—to be dynamic and react to industry demands.

The two main provisions in the regulations act as a safety net for airlines. The first allows them to justify not using a slot if new restrictions are to be introduced on particular routes. Of course, I hope that that will never be necessary, but if it should be, what data and metrics will be used? Does the Minister have an agreed plan with industry on this?

The other main provision is a limited slot hand-back of up to 5% of all slots, which are to be handed back before the start of the season. The justification for that is to ensure minimum delay and cancellations for consumers; however, the autumn timetable begins in just 11 days. The explanatory memorandum says that passengers are expected to benefit from the relief contained in the legislation by retaining good levels of historic connectivity, but also points out the downside of this provision: a potential negative impact on the marketplace.

The regulations are important to enable more airlines to deliver realistic winter schedules, and should minimise the cancellations and delays that have blighted the industry over the past few years. As I referenced earlier, many of those problems were predicted and avoidable: we cannot hollow out a skilled workforce with security requirements and expect there to be no impact on the consumer. Can the Minister update me on the work the Government have done to strengthen consumer rights, ensuring that passengers are paid compensation and refunds that they are entitled to in a timely fashion? We know that many airlines sit on tens of millions of pounds-worth of vouchers that were claimed during the pandemic, which are due to run out for customers.

These measures were brought in under exceptional circumstances. In a previous debate of this nature with one of the Minister’s predecessors back in 2021, it was said that it would take until 2023 for air traffic volumes to increase back to 2019 levels. I believe the current figure is that, on average, we are at around 88% of those 2019 levels. Do the Government have a plan for what

they will do in March 2024, four years after the first debate of this nature took place? The sector has still not bounced back fully.

In May this year, I raised the point that the Government’s approach was a very short-term one and, even taking that into consideration, impact assessments were not being fully carried out. The Minister at the time assured me that the Government would continue to monitor impacts as they went. Have they been doing so, and what are their findings? I am still keen to see a retrospective assessment of the impact of the measures to ensure that these steps are proportionate—neither too harsh nor too weak. Have the extraordinary circumstances we found ourselves in in 2020 now become the norm in the aviation sector? Earlier this year, the Minister suggested that there would be a consultation on slots reform later in the year. Could I be updated on the progress of that consultation?

I have previously raised—and will continue to raise—the issue of airspace modernisation, which I know is something the Minister was keen on when he held that post. That issue needs to be addressed strategically, so when will we see more progress on it? We could cut carbon tomorrow by 10%, 20% or 30% if we upgraded our airspace. We have an analogue system in a digital age. As passenger demand is still in a recovery phase and we feel the hangover of the covid pandemic industry-wide, it is more important than ever to consider ways to future-proof our airspace and achieve lower emissions in the process.

3.28 pm

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I am thrilled that this statutory instrument is being taken in the House—where I can talk about it—rather than up on the Committee corridor, because I would probably not have been selected to sit on that Committee.

On slots, my constituents are very concerned at the moment, not least about Luton airport, which has blighted my constituency with its overflying. That does not affect the town of Luton at all, even though the airport is owned by Luton Council. The flights massively affect the northern part of my constituency, particularly Markyate, Flamstead and the Gaddesdens.

Of course, we have a terrible situation at the moment with thousands of cars still trapped at Luton airport after the horrendous fire there. My constituents still cannot get to their vehicles, and they do not know when they will be able to. Flights are arriving and taking off, but there are still massive problems with parking, because the airport was never designed to be the size it is now.

I rise to speak on this because the Government have made a decision—I am pleased it was called in; and the decision was not made by Luton Council—that there will be a massive expansion of flights from Luton airport. I appreciate that this is not in the Minister’s portfolio, but I used to be the shadow Minister, and I know how it is for someone on the Front Bench: this may not be in his portfolio, but I am afraid he is going to cop it. It is a ridiculous decision to allow Luton airport to expand when there are so many complaints from residents not from Luton. We have seen the problem with the fire, but the airport is just not designed to be this size, and it is not geographically suitable.

I am not a hypocrite. Have I flown from Luton airport in the past? Yes, I have.

**Mike Kane:** What has this got to do with slots?

**Sir Mike Penning:** I hate to say this to the shadow Minister, but this is about slots at Luton airport—in a Labour-controlled constituency—which I thought he might be interested in, because my constituents really are.

I just want to put on the record that increased slots will cause increased pollution and increased noise for my constituents. The decision to allow increased number of flights—the expansion will almost double Luton airport—was fundamentally opposed by me, and it will be a very sad day when it goes ahead.

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

3.30 pm

**Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** I have been so looking forward to this debate—now an annual debate—on airport slots. It was very good of the Leader of the House to invite us into the big room to discuss it, although I am not sure how much this will pad out this Session of Parliament, to be perfectly honest. I have spoken about this issue many times before. I will not be speaking for long, because of my voice and, ironically, because I am supposed to be meeting an airline as we speak.

The other reason I will not be speaking for long is that this is to do with the eight slot co-ordinated airports, not one of which is in Scotland. However, we clearly have a huge interest in this with domestic flights. Indeed, if the Government were to bring forward legislation on guaranteed slots for domestic travel, particularly to London airports from Glasgow airport in my constituency, I would be grateful indeed.

Clearly, we are not going to oppose this motion. The Government are displaying uncharacteristic common sense in this motion, so it is one we will be supporting.

**Sir Mike Penning:** Shocking.

**Gavin Newlands:** Indeed. It chills me to the bone to support Tory legislation, but here I am doing just that.

I will not repeat all the questions asked by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane). They included a question on consumer rights, which he so skilfully shoehorned into a debate on airport slots, so I congratulate him on that. In particular, he raised the issue of airspace modernisation, which I have raised a number of times over the years and have pushed this Government on. They really need to get a grip on modernisation and push on, but I look forward to the Minister's answer. *[Interruption.]* I hope he is paying attention because I am about to sit down. We will support him, and I look forward to his answers to hon. Members' questions.

3.32 pm

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** We Liberal Democrats were supportive of relaxing the 20:80 rule during covid; we could not have allowed airlines to fly empty flights just so they could keep their slots. The situation is now more complex. The dysfunction in the aviation industry now is just as much about managerial capacity failings as it is about the problems stemming from the pandemic.

There have been numerous allegations of abuse of the temporary rules by some airlines to flex their muscles in the marketplace. We must guard against anti-competitive practices, which make it hard for new entrants to enter the market. Alleged attempts to hoard valuable Heathrow slots have an impact on the availability, choice and price of flights. Airlines, airports and travel operators are one of the biggest single contributors to global emissions. It is crucial that we ensure that flights are taking off only when there is proper demand for them.

There has been recovery in passenger demand, but there is continued uncertainty and a lack of resilience in the industry. Recruitment remains a challenge. Demand on some routes remains below pre-pandemic levels, and changes to our working patterns have caused a drop in business travel. We must accept that these new patterns are the norm. The motion proposes a package of measures for the winter 2023 season that lets the normal 80:20 “use it or lose it” rule stay. However, there remains some limited flexibility for airlines to keep hold of their carrier slots at airports through a small pre-season hand-back allowance of 5%, and a continuation of the previously adopted justified non-utilisation of slots measures.

Although we are broadly supportive of the Government's plans, we are concerned that there has not been parity of Government support for public transport. The rail industry and public transport such as buses are also facing changed markets. Railways still face a £2 billion annual fares shortfall from pre-covid days that the Government are unwilling to fill. The bus and coach industry is experiencing driver shortages. There is no justification for the Government to protect just one industry from inefficiencies and uncertainties in the market, and they must outline a timeline for when the covid mitigations given to airlines will come to an end. Why prioritise aviation over other modes of transportation? Airlines need clarity and time to prepare, but there must come a point when the Government tell industry that it needs to get on with things itself.

3.36 pm

**Jesse Norman:** It is a delight to wind up this debate, and I thank colleagues who have spoken in what have been brief but deep and thoughtful exchanges. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) rightly pointed to the anti-competitive potential of these measures, and also highlighted their modesty and, therefore, the sensitivities—she is absolutely right about that. She is also right in her concern about ghost flights. At the risk of violently agreeing across the Chamber, I think she is also right on the question of how long these measures will continue for. I will address that issue further in my remarks.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), was right to point out that there is no direct Scottish interest in this, and I thank him, as I thank the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), for supporting this Conservative legislation. I hope it becomes a habit for the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, as it has done for his former colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I think that is a useful development in SNP politics.

[*Jesse Norman*]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning)—[*Interruption.*] That is what I said. I said my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead, as the record will show. I was very sorry to hear again about the situation that his constituents have faced in relation to what happened at Luton. I absolutely take on board, and the House will have noted, his comments and concerns about expansion and its impact locally. He will appreciate that, as with Active Travel, the bus and coach sectors, and other items raised in the debate, that issue has nothing to do with the subject of this debate, and he was rightly critical of those who would crowbar in things that are not relevant. However, the concern of any colleague is always relevant if it is a direct constituency matter. He was right to raise it and I thank him for that.

I thank the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East for his support. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead said, the joy of having this debate on the Floor of the House of Commons is that a wider range of colleagues can come and express a concern, and we can shine a little light on the statutory legislative process, which is of enormous importance to the conduct of this House and the two Chambers of Parliament.

The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East asked about the metrics for use in relation to non-utilisation. Those are set out in the excitingly entitled “Principles of slot allocation” document at section 8.8, which concerns the “Justified non-utilisation of slots”, and those are the rules. To respond to his question about slots, obviously there is a consultation to be launched in due course, but those are the rules as they stand.

In relation to work on consumer rights, my right hon. Friend will be aware that on 27 June 2023 the Government published our response to the aviation consumer policy reform consultation, which set out legislative reform and non-legislative measures to ensure that passengers receive the best service possible. Among the non-legislative measures is a considerable range of efforts to work with industry on a variety of measures designed to accelerate and speed up the protection of those rights. He is absolutely right.

In relation to the use of these measures in future, Baroness Vere of Norbiton, the aviation Minister, said in the House of Lords recently that she was asking herself the question as to when these measures would wind up, and she hoped it would be soon. I think that represents the Government’s position.

It is true that we have a consultation planned on slots reform. Members will also note that the level of consultation that informs this set of measures is well spelled out in the explanatory memorandum to the legislation, and that sets out in some detail what conversations and discussions have been had with the industry, and it provides a fairly compelling background to these modest but flexible measures.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. I am one of those people who came in here just to listen, because this debate was not being held in a dusty corridor somewhere upstairs—I am here to learn. I understand from my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel

Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) that the Ministry decides the number of slots, but who decides who gets those slots? Is it the airport or some other body?

**Jesse Norman:** I had sat down, but I am happy to take a late question from my colleague. The number of slots derives from historical control over and entitlement to slots at existing airports, but there are also mechanisms for reallocating slots that have been handed back and for allocating slots when they become available. Those are conducted by an independent process and reviewed by an independent process, and there are no plans in this legislation to make any changes to that.

**Sir Mike Penning:** Going back to my speech earlier and the increase in slots at Luton airport, can the Minister indicate when the increase in flights will start to occur, so that I can inform my constituents how much of their life is going to be blighted even more by the flights from Luton airport?

**Jesse Norman:** I am not sure I quite caught the force of the question, because I was being interrupted when my right hon. Friend spoke.

**Sir Mike Penning:** What are the timescales for the increase in slots from Luton airport, now that the Government have given permission for the expansion of Luton airport? That will have a massive impact on my constituents, and I would like to inform them factually about what is going on.

**Jesse Norman:** Existing slots will follow the procedures laid out in the legislation. As regards future slots, they will be allocated according to the consultation that we will be launching shortly. I should say that this is the last intervention I will take, Madam Deputy Speaker, since I had sat down before the two previous ones.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Business without Debate

### SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

*Ordered,*

That Lucy Powell be appointed to the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority in place of Thangam Debbonaire, until the end of the present Parliament, in pursuance of paragraph 1(d) of Schedule 3 to the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, as amended.—(*Penny Mordaunt.*)

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. The House will now be suspended pending the announcement of the results of the Select Committee Chair elections. The Division bells will be rung when the House is ready to resume.

3.45 pm

*Sitting suspended.*

4.25 pm

*On resuming—*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We now have the results of the election of Select Committee Chairs.

In the Business and Trade Committee Chair election, 471 votes were cast, 10 of which were invalid. The counting went to two rounds. There were 430 active votes in the second round, excluding those ballot papers whose preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached was therefore 216 votes. I can announce that Liam Byrne was elected Chair with 216 votes.

In the Petitions Committee Chair election, 467 votes were cast, eight of which were invalid. The counting went to two rounds. There were 433 active votes in the second round excluding those ballot papers whose preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached was therefore 217 votes. I can announce that Cat Smith was elected Chair with 227 votes.

In the Committee on Standards Chair election, 471 votes were cast, 14 of which were invalid. The quota to be reached was therefore 229 votes. I can announce that Ms Harriet Harman was elected Chair with 341 votes.

All three Chairs will take up their posts immediately and I congratulate them on their election. The results of the counts were under the alternative vote system and they will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and be published on the internet.

## South Fylde Line

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

4.27 pm

**Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a great pleasure to be holding this debate with a fellow Lancashire Member of Parliament in the Chair. In fact, we have gone from one transport debate to another, albeit with a rather large gap in between. As a Lancashire MP yourself, you are more than well aware of the issues on our county's rail network and of the need for modernisation of the infrastructure and rolling stock. Indeed, you have fought diligently on behalf of your constituents for exactly the improvements that I am fighting for for mine.

Today, I am pleased to be able to raise the subject of the South Fylde line. It is raised repeatedly not only on the doorsteps, but at local events and in written correspondence. Just standing on the platform at Preston station, people come up to me and say, "We need to do better than this."

Throughout my time as Member of Parliament, I have fought to improve services. In this, we have seen progress. The dilapidated Pacer trains, which used to deposit waste directly on to the tracks, are thankfully a thing of the past. In 2018, I was delighted to reopen the modernised Kirkham and Wesham station following the installation of a new platform and two lifts serving it, providing, at long last, a station that was accessible to all.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my really good friend for allowing me to intervene. May I say that I am delighted to hear that news? I last went to that station in July 1969 when I was going to the nearby Weeton camp. I have to say that it was showing slight age then, and so, some 50 years later, I am really glad that it has been modernised.

**Mark Menzies:** Colonel Bob, not only has it been modernised, but I still speak to constituents who remember you passing through in 1969. Once my right hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath—

**Bob Stewart:** Beckenham.

**Mark Menzies:** Sorry. Once my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has passed through, he is never forgotten.

The holy grail remains, however, the doubling of services on the line through the installation of a passing loop, and I am concerned that efforts in that area have, frankly, stalled. In June 2020, I submitted a full restoring your railway bid to double train services on the South Fylde line. The bid was one of 50 submitted, with the then Chancellor, now the Prime Minister, selecting it to be taken forward with Government funding to help to put together a strategic outline business case.

The SOBC was submitted in November 2021, and since then there has been no further progress or communication from the Department. My fellow bid partners and I feel slightly abandoned, with even the formal email address of restoring your railway now closed. My purpose today is therefore to seek assurances

[Mark Menzies]

that the project continues to have the Government's backing. The years of hard work that went into reaching that stage must not be allowed to fall by the wayside. Earlier this year, I launched the campaign to get the South Fylde line back on track.

I will give some context to where we find ourselves today. First opened in the 1840s, a little over a decade on from Stephenson's Rocket, the history of the South Fylde line parallels the story of Victorian Britain and our railways more generally. Major expansion came in the latter decades of the 1800s, with new stations opening to serve the booming Victorian holiday industry. That was growing in Fylde, not just in the beach resorts and the residential communities that sprung up alongside them. They provided vital links for those commuting to Liverpool, Greater Manchester and the great mill towns of east Lancashire, where industry was booming.

The post-war era saw our railways enter a period of decline, with the rise of cars and dwindling passenger numbers, and of course Dr Beeching's cuts would soon follow. Despite that, the South Fylde line survived as a two-track line until the 1980s, when the axe finally fell and the line was reduced to a single track capable of serving one train an hour in each direction. Recent years have seen something of a consensus reached around Beeching and the period of his cutbacks, and the closures that started with his report: they were a mistake. To echo the Prime Minister's recent words, they were an example of an "old consensus" that favoured cars over public transport.

As the Minister knows from our correspondence on the topic, the South Fylde line falls far short of what is satisfactory, and is even further from being a good service. Reliability is a major issue, with one delay having an impact on services for the rest of the day, and a single track is neither the only issue nor the sole reason for the reliability issues. Be it staff sickness, driver shortages, faulty trains or signalling issues, Fylde's commuters have heard it all. On a weekday evening, rail replacement services have become an increasingly common occurrence, turning a 20-minute train journey from Lytham to Preston into one lasting almost an hour.

In addition, Northern cut the frequency of weekend services in August, the peak of the summer tourist season, for reasons that remain unclear to me. Recent data from On Time Trains listed St Annes-on-the-Sea as the 2,204th ranked station for reliability, with all stations located beyond the line's division at Kirkham and Wesham ranking similarly. Remarkably, that is an improvement from August, when the station fell outside the top 2,500, out of just 2,617 open railway stations across the UK. That is miserable reading for Fylde's commuters and the many people who choose Fylde as a holiday destination. The train, I am afraid, is an unreliable option for them.

**Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): My hon. Friend is articulating very well the problems on the line regarding punctuality, which we have seen for far too long. Of course, our aspiration for the South Fylde line is not just to improve punctuality but to double the number of trains that run on the line every hour. In both our constituencies, that would be of huge benefit to local tourism businesses in terms of creating jobs, inward

investment and growth in our local economy. We both worked so hard to get the feasibility funding that was delivered now over three years ago. Would he urge our brilliant rail Minister to do everything that he can to try to look at creative solutions around the capacity issues at Preston, so that we can finally take the project forward and both our constituencies can benefit?

**Mark Menzies:** My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. Blackpool South gets huge numbers of visitors. Blackpool pleasure beach has its own train station, yet people choose not to take the train to one of the biggest visitor attractions in the UK; they come by other means. It is absolutely ludicrous. It is a real privilege to be able to welcome my hon. Friend, as he rows in behind my ongoing campaign for the South Fylde line. It is great when colleagues are working together for the same cause; it adds huge value.

As the SOBC pointed out, the rankings are based only on services that are formally recorded as cancelled. Services turned around before reaching the end of the line are not included, yet at Blackpool South, between March 2019 and March 2020, this occurred 173 times—the equivalent of 9.5 days-worth of services that did not complete the route. The problem has not gone away. For the stations not served, these are effectively cancellations, yet they do not appear in the statistics as such. Official figures are therefore significantly understating the problem.

HS2 may no longer be coming to Preston, but links across Lancashire and to nearby cities such as Liverpool and Manchester remain important. In addition, the west coast main line continues to offer frequent and relatively fast routes to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Birmingham and London. The cost of those trains is such that most people reserve seats on specific trains to have the certainty they need about their arrival time, which they simply do not have on a South Fylde line service.

The line travels through the heart of my constituency and we are deeply proud of it. We have several active friends groups, who work tirelessly to improve stations such as Lytham, St Anne's-on-the-Sea and Squires Gate. I want to see more people on the trains, so that they can see and appreciate the work of the friends groups. One need only read local author Steve Garrill's "Walks From The South Fylde Line", or Community Rail Lancashire's "Discover the South Fylde Line" to discover the trove of activities, be they leisure, cultural or entertainment, within reach of the line. Whether relaxing on St Annes beach and walking over the sand dunes, taking in the estuary views from Lytham Green, or testing your golfing skills at the world-class Royal Lytham, coastal Fylde has so much to offer and is a magnet for day-trippers and holidaymakers alike. Beyond Lytham St Annes is Blackpool pleasure beach, one of the country's biggest visitor attractions. We also have a thriving night-time economy. All these activities are served by the unreliable and infrequent service on the South Fylde line.

As well as its fantastic hospitality and tourism offering, Fylde is a vibrant economic hub, and the rail line that serves it is vital for countless people commuting into or around Fylde and on to destinations beyond. A short walk from Salwick station, we have Springfields, for 75 years the home of British nuclear fuel manufacturing and a site that is primed to grow with the industry's expansion in the drive for net zero. This season, AFC Fylde has returned to the National league—the fifth tier of



English football—swelling crowds. Indeed, one of my London-based researchers told me about his experience of leaving a mid-week match at the start of injury time in the hope of catching the 9.30 pm train, missing the train by mere seconds, and instead having an hour's wait on the platform for the next one. Similarly, supporters of nearby Blackpool and Preston North End will have had frustrating experiences getting to and from matches, despite the clubs' stadiums lying a short distance from the South Fylde line.

I know from my time on the Transport Committee that my hon. Friend the Minister is passionate and has fought to ensure that his corner of East Sussex is served by a service that meets the needs of his constituents. I am privileged to have responding to this debate a Minister who understands the issues. When we served together on that Committee, he was never frightened of challenging the industry and holding it to account, and shining a light on shoddy, inadequate services. He does that for his constituents; I am doing it for mine.

Let us consider a comparison between Bexhill in the south-east of England, and Fylde, Lancashire. Bexhill has hourly trains to both London and Brighton, doubling to two in each direction during peak hours, with several additional trains to Eastbourne, Hastings and Ashford International. Battle sees twice-hourly services to London and Hastings, with an additional London train service running during peak times. Even Robertsbridge in my hon. Friend the Minister's constituency—a village that, with a population of just over 2,000, is comparable to Wrea Green in my constituency—is connected to both London and Hastings by two trains an hour in each direction during peak times, with just 1% of services cancelled. That is the kind of connectivity that the Minister enjoys—he has fought for it—but the kind of which Fylde constituents can only dream. I am sure that he shares my resolve to put that right.

In response to the recent reliability issues that I mentioned, I ran a survey of my constituents to seek feedback on that topic. I will share a couple of examples that are representative of wider feedback and illustrate my point. These are the comments of a constituent:

“I'd love to be able to travel from Ansdell to my office in Liverpool but, with one train an hour meaning often poor connections—and then that one train being prone to cancellations, it's rare that I feel I can risk it, so end up driving to Preston, which is longer and parking more expensive.”

That does nothing to help our carbon footprint.

Another said:

“If the trains were reliable then I would use them but, after having to find contingency plans at the last moment on too many occasions I no longer put myself through the stress of using them. Unfortunately, I often have to drive to Preston to rescue stranded family members when trains are cancelled with no reason! The train timetable we have at the moment fails to connect with the train timetables going North and South. If I am going to London I have to spend almost an hour waiting on a very cold and miserable platform and the same happens when I return. Likewise when travelling to Lancaster and further north. Why would I do it? I would park my car at Preston station and drive.”

That is just madness. It all comes at an environmental and financial cost, not to mention that it increases traffic on our roads at busy times. The inefficiency of having to drive to the mainline station at Preston, a dozen or so miles away, will not be lost on my hon. Friend the Minister. Passenger numbers are relatively low, which I contend is a direct result of the infrequency

and unreliability of the trains, and has, I believe, led to under-investment in the line—a vicious circle that we must now break. If levelling up is to be more than a slogan, people in Fylde should not have to continue putting up with such abject service.

Let us look to the future and possible solutions. To refer back to the Prime Minister, I wholeheartedly agree with his statement that:

“What we really need is better transport connections in the north.”

The cap on bus fares is fantastic, and I am grateful to the Government for their investment in Fylde's roads. The new Preston west distributor road—the Edith Rigby Way—has opened, along with a new junction to the M55, while the M55 link road, known as the Moss Road, and the A585 Singleton bypass, are fast approaching completion. However, as I mentioned at the start of the debate, the holy grail remains a return to twice-hourly trains on the South Fylde line. The most efficient way to achieve that is the installation of a passing loop around Ansdell, enabling trains to pass each other roughly halfway through the line's route. We are not asking for anything extravagant—indeed, many of my constituents still remember a time when that line was dual track and services were more frequent. There was not a passing loop: the whole thing was dual track. As such, I believe that my ask on behalf of my constituents is modest, realistic and, above all, deliverable in a timely way.

The scrapping of the northern leg of HS2 in favour of investing in the road and rail connections that link our communities in the north delivers a great new chance to see this project become a reality. With £2.5 billion being allocated to local authorities to spend on projects in these areas, there is an opportunity to deliver lasting change for communities, such as delivering on the levelling up promises of recent years. As the Minister will recall, when I wrote to him this summer, one key obstacle he mentioned was the need to reserve capacity at Preston to allow certain platforms to be used for future HS2 services. That problem has now been made obsolete by the Prime Minister's recent decision.

The previously submitted bid, which dates back to 2021, gave three options for the project, ranging from £23.9 million to £47.3 million. Those figures did not include the redevelopment of the former Royal Mail parcel platform at Preston for passenger services, which would instead have been carried out as part of HS2's arrival, nor did they account for the inflation of the past two years, which has been particularly acute in the transport construction sector. I welcome that money, but with it being divided across the country and costs no doubt having risen, the Government may well still need to step in to support and help fund this critical project.

Rail connectivity is both our past and our future. Investment in it can help deliver economic opportunities for the future of Fylde's hospitality, manufacturing and wider business sectors. The Government have been making that point in recent weeks, and I hope their words are followed by deeds. The passing loop is a project that we are crying out for, but it can become a reality only with the backing of both Government and local authorities. I hope that I can count on my hon. Friend the excellent Minister to help get the South Fylde line back on track. Let's get on with it.

4.46 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on securing this debate on enhancements to passenger services on the South Fylde line. I really do appreciate his continued support for improving that line and the campaigns he has led on behalf of his constituents. He has been particularly kind to me, so let me reply in kind.

I served alongside my hon. Friend on the Transport Select Committee. He works incredibly hard, not just for his own constituents and their transport needs but for all constituents across this country, and I certainly appreciate that work. He now holds me to account, and he does so particularly well. I am grateful to him, and to Community Rail Lancashire and the South Fylde Line Community Rail Partnership, for all their work on the “Discover the South Fylde Line” guide. I am also grateful to the local volunteers involved in revamping the cycle shelter at St Annes-on-the-Sea station as part of its 150th anniversary back in the summer. There is more that my hon. Friend does, and I am keen to help him do more—he will know that that is genuinely meant.

I also understand the points that he makes about the reliability of the services on that line, their frequency and the ultimate knock-on effects for passengers, particularly those looking to make their connections to the west coast main line. I acknowledge that cancellations continue to be a challenge for Northern, largely due to sickness rates being higher than average, training requirements to bring more drivers into service, and aspects of Sunday working. I assure my hon. Friend and the entire House that Northern recognises that challenge and is continuing to progress its improvement plans; admittedly, though, some of these aspects will be addressed only through wider reform. My hon. Friend will be aware that, with Sunday working being voluntary on Northern, we will have to reform the railway to ensure it works in the way that its passengers insist it should work. That is currently with the trade unions, and we are looking to them to play their part so that we can deliver a service that is fit for this century.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of more frequent and reliable rail services to support his area’s visitor economy, and I hear the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) in that regard. They both make the entirely reasonable point that relatively low passenger numbers on the South Fylde line may be due in part to a lack of reliability and therefore of trust in the line’s services. It is a cycle we need to break and for which we need to find a solution.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde for sponsoring a bid to my Department’s restoring your railway programme. As he obviously knows—indeed, he referred it, but for good order I repeat it—the bid calls for the introduction of a passing loop on the South Fylde line to allow for the doubling of services from one train per hour to two trains per hour. I hear his call, and I want to assist him. He is right that we have had a

particular challenge at Preston. We have discussed that, and he has bought forward solutions. I also hear him when he says that some of those issues may go away with the change to HS2, and I am particularly keen to see if we now have a solution that we can put in place. These matters will take some time, as we work out the consequences of the decision to move away from the final phases of HS2 towards Network North. However, I can tell him that I will be looking with my officials to see if we now have a solution, and if that is the case, I want to be in a position to help him. I am not yet in a position to confirm the outcome of the bid, but I will be in contact with my hon. Friend in due course, and I am very happy to meet him so that he can challenge me and officials if he disagrees with our conclusions.

My hon. Friend is completely right to highlight the comments by the Prime Minister about the need for better transport connections across the north. That is exactly why we have announced the Network North strategy, which will deliver improvements to various transport modes in the north of England, not just on rail. I know my hon. Friend and other hon. Members will have welcomed the announcement of a brand-new £2.5 billion fund to transform local transport in 14 rural counties, smaller cities and towns in every part of the north. That will cover the big city regions, but also areas outside them. Notably, it could include more trams for Blackpool.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Prime Minister’s announcement on HS2 opens up the conversation and allows us to explore possibilities for transport projects that will be locally led and the effects of which will be more locally felt. I am very keen to work with him, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South and other hon. Members on how we harness those possibilities and target improvements where they feel they are most needed. I also want to highlight that my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary has agreed that Cottam Parkway station on the Preston to Blackpool line should develop its full business case under the transforming cities fund. This is another example of how this Government are delivering for the north of England.

To conclude, I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde, who I believe may be about to stand up and intervene—*[Interruption.]* No, I got that wrong; he is just excited that I am getting him to the end, as I am sure you are, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank him for securing this debate, and for all he does to get everything his constituents need; he is assiduous in that regard. I want to assure him that I take on board the points he makes about the South Fylde line, and that my door is open to him to come and discuss the wider transport opportunities that will benefit his constituents under Network North. I also assure him that the loop and the issue at Preston will be looked at again, and I hope we will find a solution that will finally deliver for him and his constituents.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.53 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 18 October 2023

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

## UK Support for Stability in Libya

9.30 am

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for stability in Libya.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this morning, Ms McDonagh.

I want to begin by sending my best wishes to all Libyans who have been affected by the horrific floods that have killed thousands in the east of the country and have displaced many more. In Derna, a town with a population of just 90,000, at least 4,000 people have been confirmed dead and another 10,000 have been reported missing. It was the last thing Libya needed. The death toll was clearly exacerbated by an inability to cope with a crisis of such magnitude, as well as by the lack of proper infrastructure.

I last visited Libya in 2005 with the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. Although we were not able to meet the then leader Colonel Gaddafi—or President Gaddafi—we were able to meet Moussa Koussa, his *de facto* deputy. It was a deeply disturbing experience being in Libya, a place with no road signs. Tripoli was a city where you could not find your way around unless you had been there before, because there were no directions and no street names—no nothing, in fact—and we were spied on in the hotel we stayed in. A lot has changed since that day, that year, that era. It is questionable whether it is better or worse now.

Since I applied for this debate, the world has become an even more unstable place. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has shaken the middle east and north Africa to the core. The increased instability makes this debate even more important than it was before. I want to put on the record my condolences to all the innocent Israelis who have lost loved ones as a result of the Hamas terrorist attacks, and to everyone in the region, especially in Gaza, who has lost their life as part of the wider conflict.

As we begin this important debate, it may be beneficial to look at the chequered history of Libya, a country that went from being part of the Roman empire to being part of the Ottoman empire. It was briefly an Italian colony in the 1920s and '30s and became a monarchy under King Idris from 1951 to 1969, and then effectively a dictatorship under Gaddafi for 42 years. I realise that we do not have time for a full history of Libya, but that gives a brief background. It is right on the edge of Europe, in north Africa—the closest point to the European continent apart from Tangier and Gibraltar.

Some Libyans will have lived under four different kinds of Government, continually suffering from one type of Government to the next. After the 2011 revolution, there were elections in 2012 and 2014, but, sadly, division continued and the country fractured into competing

groups. A UN-led peace effort brought the Libya political agreement of December 2015, which established the Government of national unity in Tripoli. That Government failed to unite the country. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan warlord, attacked Tripoli in April 2019, assisted by Wagner Group mercenaries, but was beaten back with the help of Turkish forces. A ceasefire was signed in October 2020, which led to another political attempt to appoint a Government of national accord in Tripoli headed by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh. That also failed to unite the country. The House of Representatives—the national Parliament that was elected in 2014—then appointed a rival Government of national stability based in Benghazi.

Divisions continue to the present day. Libya effectively has two Governments, two Assemblies, rogue warlords and militias very often armed by outside countries and groups that have an interest in what is happening in Libya, especially its natural resources. Tragically, ordinary Libyans have little say in the direction of their country. The legacy of Gaddafi and the failure of the revolution is illustrated in the tragedy of Derna: a lack of effective institutions of the state; a failure to invest in infrastructure, training and capacity building; widespread corruption; a political class that lines its own pockets rather than serving the people; and the inability of the nascent civil society to find its voice.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. He is outlining the relatively recent history of Libya. Does he agree that there could well be progress not only in Libya, but in the wider region and even here in the UK, where there are £12 billion of frozen assets from the Libyan regime, particularly under Gaddafi? Gaddafi and others supplied terrorist material to the likes of the Provisional IRA. Many innocent victims here could benefit, as well as, more fundamentally, people in Libya and the wider middle east.

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank the hon. Member for his timely intervention. I will go on to talk about why Libya matters to us in the UK, but he is absolutely right to say that for decades, or certainly for many years, Gaddafi and his so-called Government were funding terror groups throughout the world, especially in Ireland, in Northern Ireland and in the United Kingdom. What happens in Libya in future, and the role that we and the British Government can play, matters to all of us—not just in the UK, but across Europe, the wider middle east and north Africa. It is clear to me that Libya is a failed state and has been one for some time. I will now say why, as the hon. Member pointed out, it matters to us.

Libya's long Mediterranean coastline is within a few hundred miles of the southern flank of NATO, and there are over 500 Russian mercenaries controlling part of the country. Given the growing Russian aggression and involvement in Libya, this has clear security implications for the alliance. The Opposition's commitment to preserving that security is unshakeable, as I am sure is the case for all Members across the House. Libya's long, porous border with countries of the Sahel has also been a route for drugs and people-smuggling and is now one of the main routes for migrants to cross the desert and take boats across the Mediterranean. The conditions in which the migrants are held are terrible and terrifying and are

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

a major abuse of humanitarian standards and basic human rights. This was exacerbated hugely by the recent floods.

As I said in response to the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), Libya matters for our nation's security. The lack of effective government in Libya has allowed warped ideologies to thrive. The terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015, in which 30 British tourists were killed, including two people from Leeds, were carried out by a Tunisian trained in Libya. The Manchester bombing of 2017 was carried out by a British Libyan radicalised in Libya. If we are serious about protecting the United Kingdom from terrorism, we must be serious about restoring legitimate government to Libya.

As we know, Libya has the largest oil reserves in Africa. At the moment, it produces 1 million barrels per day and large quantities of natural gas. We are rightly looking to wean ourselves off Russian gas, and this could play a part, but it is important to note that the huge unpopulated areas of Libya are also perfect for solar farms and other renewable sources.

When I held the role of shadow Minister with responsibility for the region, I worked closely with our allies and partner organisations to develop a potential road map for peace in Libya. This was ambitious, but if we do not operate with ambition, we will never achieve anything worthy of defending the rights and wellbeing of the Libyan people, as well as the wider area.

The year 2011 should have been an opportunity for a new start in Libya, but it was not. That is thanks in no small part to a variety of international actors who have intervened in Libya for self-serving reasons, whether that be an attempt to access an abundance of natural resources or the geopolitical advantages of having a sympathetic Government installed in north Africa. Sadly, that has been to the detriment of the Libyan people, who have continually suffered hugely. Healthcare services are dire, access to electricity is extremely limited and the ongoing lack of security has left thousands displaced. As the penholder for Libya at the United Nations, the United Kingdom must play its part in alleviating the suffering of millions of Libyans. We can do it, and we should and must.

The implications of the lack of a co-ordinated international response to the crisis in Libya and of the outright failure of Libyan state institutions have contributed significantly to the refugee crisis, with a subsequent impact on the UK's strategic interests in the region. It is time for the United Kingdom to work with the UN to ensure that Libya can begin to repair the horrific damage that it has faced after years of political instability and civil war. In the past, the international approach has lacked understanding of the situation on the ground in the country. It failed properly to understand the political, military, social and ethnic circumstances that have fuelled the conflict. I therefore urge the UK Government to take a leading role in convening an urgent high-level meeting of all the state parties involved in Libya, including France, Italy, Germany, Turkey, Russia, Egypt, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, as well as, of course, the United States. Those parties should meet regularly to assess the situation and to help Libya to heal itself.

The United Kingdom should also urge all foreign powers to withdraw military personnel from Libya immediately, end the supply of military equipment and mercenaries to the country, ensure that the UN is able to investigate any reports that the permanent ceasefire agreement has been violated, and ensure that all foreign fighters leave the country within three months as per the 23 October ceasefire arrangement. We must ensure that the United Nations is able to uphold its arms embargo by allowing all inspections of cargo entering Libya to be carried out in full, and we must condemn those countries that continue to allow arms to enter Libya.

There must be a leader in mediating the negotiation of a political settlement between the main power brokers that ensures a just distribution of the country's wealth and enormous potential wealth, and opens the way for the unification of key national institutions including the Libyan army, the Libyan central bank and the National Oil Corporation. That leader must also urgently collaborate with all external powers to ensure that the Libyan economy can be reformed, as it is one of the fundamental drivers of the conflict and a root cause of violence, displaced people and corruption. Some of the people I spoke to in preparing for today's debate told me that if only Libya had a properly functioning economy that worked well, many of the migrants who come from sub-Saharan Africa and eventually end up on the shores of Europe—some of them come to the UK—would be content to work within the economy of Libya and send remittances back to their home countries, communities, towns and villages, and that would stop them wanting to come across the Mediterranean sea and into Europe. That is something we need to work towards.

The aims should also work towards the ultimate goal of a transition to constitutional governance with peaceful and fully democratic parliamentary and presidential elections. I believe that that will end slavery, people-trafficking and arbitrary deportations. It will step up the help to improve the lives and wellbeing of the Libyan people in order to alleviate the refugee crisis and prevent any further loss of life for those who are forced to cross the Mediterranean in perilous conditions. It is in our economic and strategic interests, too.

I welcome the discussion that took place earlier this week at the Security Council meeting, including the renewal of the mandate for the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, but we need action, not more words. Earlier this year, the Security Council reaffirmed its strong commitment to an

“inclusive, Libyan-led and Libyan-owned political process” facilitated by the United Nations. Now is the time to make it happen.

I thank the House of Commons Library and the former UK ambassador to Libya, Peter Millett, for their assistance with today's debate. I also thank all Members for attending this morning to discuss such a vital issue.

9.45 am

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Ms McDonagh. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for securing this important debate.

My strong interest in Libya stems from my childhood experiences. As the only Conservative Member of Parliament to have been born in a communist country—communist Poland, of course—it is difficult to explain to young people today how there was no food in the shops and everything was rationed. We could not get chocolate, exotic fruits or anything like that, but my aunt and uncle were sent to work in Tripoli and would send back cases of oranges. For a child in communist Poland, oranges were like something extraordinary from outer space, because we could not see them or buy them. I took them to school; we drew paintings of them; we made marmalade out of the peel. We talked about Libya, looked at it on the map and thought of it as some sort of paradise because it had these exotic fruits that we in communist Poland could not have. That is why I became chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Libya in 2006, shortly after being elected.

I then decided to write a book on Colonel Gaddafi. It is in my office; I forgot to bring it, but I wish I had. I wrote that book about Libya because I was extremely concerned about the rapprochement that Mr Blair, the then Labour Prime Minister, was implementing in trying to bring Gaddafi in from the cold. We all remember the scenes of Mr Blair smiling with Colonel Gaddafi in the tent outside Tripoli. I felt that that was the wrong approach, bearing in mind all our outstanding issues with Colonel Gaddafi. Simply to bring him in from the cold without dealing with those issues was, I think, wrong. More importantly, the Arab world thought it was wrong. Colonel Gaddafi was perceived as a recalcitrant, unstable and highly unreliable individual within the Arab world and among Arab leaders. For the United Kingdom to have so clearly bent over backwards to accommodate this man was felt to be inappropriate by many in the Arab world at the time.

I tried to campaign on the issue with the then Labour Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. I got absolutely nowhere, which is why I decided to write the book. I have to say it was a fascinating experience. As the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) says, there are so many outstanding issues that were left unresolved. Lockerbie, the worst terrorist atrocity on UK soil, was a result of Colonel Gaddafi sponsoring the bombing of the airliner over Scotland in 1988. There is also the funding and sending of Semtex to the IRA. However, the most poignant issue that I came across during the time I was writing the book was the murder of PC Yvonne Fletcher in St James's Square, just outside the Libyan embassy. When I go through the square now, I still pause for a moment in front of the beautiful plaque that commemorates her.

PC Yvonne Fletcher was a serving police officer who was guarding a demonstration outside the Libyan People's Bureau when somebody from the embassy shot her. I have met PC Murray, who was at the scene and was with PC Fletcher in the ambulance as she was taken to hospital. He has led a decades-long campaign to find PC Yvonne Fletcher's killer and have him brought to justice here in the United Kingdom. For her memory as a serving police officer, we must continue to raise the issue in the House of Commons.

The revolution came in 2011, one year after I wrote my book. I remember February 2011 so well: we had wall-to-wall coverage on our television screens of the

revolution that started in Tobruk and swept across the whole of Libya. In the House of Commons, the scenario was that this disaster was happening and that something had to be done about it. I am not prone to criticising Conservative politicians, but I will on this occasion. Mr Cameron, the then Conservative Prime Minister, intervened; he planned the invasion with Monsieur Hollande, the French President, on the back of a fag packet, without any consideration. It is easy to kill the dictator, but what happens when we cut off the head? All the tentacles collapse. Like the hon. Member for Leeds North East, I have been to Libya on many occasions. The country was almost a carbon copy of President Saddam Hussein's Iraq: everything—all the apparatus across the country—was controlled by one party and one man.

I remember well that we were whipped to vote for the invasion. From memory, I think that just a handful of Conservative MPs rebelled, and I very much regret that I was not one of them. The Conservative MPs who rebelled against Mr Cameron absolutely got it right, because there was not enough planning for the invasion of Libya. We bombed Libya back to the stone age. It is very easy to take on somebody like Colonel Gaddafi, who had obsolete Soviet-era equipment, poor radar and tanks and all the rest of it, but we bombed Libya with very little thought as to what would follow.

I asked to see Mr Cameron two or three days before Colonel Gaddafi was killed. I went to his office. I knew he was not listening to a word I was saying, because throughout the whole conversation he was signing bottles of House of Commons Scotch for raffle and auction prizes. One rather knows that somebody is not listening when, while one tries to raise important issues with them, they are doing a secondary task—signing their name on bottles of Scotch. *[Interruption.]* This is my book on Colonel Gaddafi, which I wrote in 2010; I spent over two years writing it.

**Mr Gregory Campbell:** Other books are available!

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I asked Mr Cameron, “What is going to happen to Colonel Gaddafi?” We all know how Gaddafi was killed: a convoy was leaving Sirte for the desert, and British and French military intelligence, in collaboration with the militants, got him in the tunnel and he was killed. Of course, he had to be killed. Some people said that he had to be silenced—that he knew too much. The hon. Member for Leeds North East will remember the allegations about all the funding from Colonel Gaddafi to Monsieur Sarkozy; apparently Gaddafi gave Sarkozy millions of dollars for political campaigns. He had to be silenced. I will never forget the words that Mr Cameron said to me. He sort of metaphorically patted me on the head and said, “Nothing to worry about—it's all in hand, old boy.” Two or three days later, Colonel Gaddafi was killed.

I am no apologist for Colonel Gaddafi. He was a brutal, evil dictator who suppressed his own people, and my book chronicles the extraordinary human rights abuses that he implemented against his own people in Libya. Nobody here will shed a tear that Colonel Gaddafi is no longer running Libya or able to suppress his own people, but the reason I raise it is that we have to think about the mistakes we are making as a nation, whether that is in Iraq or Libya. Certainly in my time as a

[Daniel Kawczynski]

Member of Parliament, every time we have intervened in an Arab nation, rather than leaving it to the Arab League or the Arab people, and killed the dictator, what has ensued? Total chaos, total paralysis, internecine warfare, and brutality and killing that one could argue is of even greater consequence and destabilisation than what took place under the dictator. I very much hope that future generations of Members of Parliament will learn from our experiences and the mistakes we have made.

When I was on the Foreign Affairs Committee in that brief Parliament from 2015 to 2017, there was an attempt to investigate Mr Cameron. There was an attempt at that stage to investigate how he had brought us to intervene in Libya, but in reality it got us nowhere and little was done.

I would like to put it on the record how deeply disappointing it is that so few Members of Parliament are here. There is not one Conservative Member in this Chamber apart from the Minister and the Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory). Bearing in mind our responsibility as a party and as a Government for the intervention in that country and the extraordinary misery that the Libyan people continue to experience as a result, that is a very bad show from my party.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East for bringing the debate here. Despite all the difficulties we are seeing in Israel and the Gaza strip and in Ukraine, we must not forget about Libya. These are our neighbours in the underbelly of the Mediterranean—in a country now being used, as a result of our intervention, for the massive trafficking of people from sub-Saharan Africa through Libya to Lampedusa and beyond. As British parliamentarians, particularly after our intervention in that country, we have a duty and a responsibility to continue to help the people of Libya.

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** There being no other Back-Bench speakers, I call the first Front-Bench speaker.

9.58 am

**Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP):** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. This is an unusual experience, because I cannot remember the last time that I looked over my shoulder and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was not there. Perhaps we should send out a search party.

I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for securing the debate and for his thoughtful and considered opening speech. He is absolutely right that Libya's proximity to Europe makes what happens there relevant to us and to our neighbours. What he said was echoed by the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski): we have a responsibility to Libya, to what goes on there and to putting it right. As the hon. Member for Leeds North East said, the political chaos that we are seeing—with two Governments, two Assemblies and an assortment of warlords battling for control of and access to Libya's vast resources—makes this a pressing problem. We cannot ignore the political chaos in Libya that affects the everyday lives of ordinary Libyan people.

This debate is also important because, perhaps understandably in the light of what has happened elsewhere in the past few days and weeks, the tragic events of 10 September in Derna seem a long time ago. But the people of Derna will live with that tragedy every single day and will have to live with it for a long time. It is absolutely right today that when we talk about Libya, we take the time to consider what happened in Derna, why it happened and what we, as the United Kingdom, can do to help in providing humanitarian aid to help those people to rebuild their shattered lives. Indeed, that goes beyond Derna to the whole of Libya.

I therefore thank the hon. Member for Leeds North East for giving us the opportunity to have today's debate. He is absolutely right that what we are seeing in Derna is almost a microcosm of the failed state of Libya. It has all the hallmarks of that failed state: the presence of foreign mercenaries, which he talked about, and the export of international terrorism, as we have suffered to our grave cost on these shores. Those are a result of that failed state.

I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham for bringing up the memory of Yvonne Fletcher. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) has campaigned passionately in this House never to allow Yvonne Fletcher's memory to be forgotten and has ceaselessly campaigned for justice.

As we have said, Libya is a failed state, and what we see in Derna and in that devastating flood was caused by a mixture of climate change and systematic neglect of infrastructure. Officially, we are told that there are 4,000 dead, but the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs believes that it is more than 11,000. There are still 10,000 people missing, 40,000 people displaced with nowhere to go, and 20,000 people living without basic sanitation and hygiene. The city's infrastructure was torn apart, with 120 schools damaged, a similar number of health facilities put out of action, and 11,000 buildings either damaged or completely destroyed. The scale of the disaster is unimaginable, and rebuilding Derna is a real challenge.

There is an understandable anger among the people there, because they are the ones having to live with the consequences of this failed state—of not having a functioning Government. Little wonder, then, that they rose up as much as they could—Libyan citizens, civil society groups and human rights defenders—and lodged a petition calling on the international community to establish an investigation into why this happened, to identify the culprits and to bring them to justice.

Those demands come as the Libyan officials are trying to dismiss what happened as purely an effect of climate change. Of course climate change played a part, but so did systematic neglect and the consequences of a completely failed political system. As the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said, a decision was taken—I think his quote was “We bombed Libya back to the stone age”—without a thought as to what would happen subsequently. Well, this is what happens when things like that happen without any thought for the future.

A decade or more of armed conflict between rival authorities and the collapse of the dam in Derna are not separate issues. The war has eroded national institutions, the infrastructure of the state has gone, and the economy is in chaos. That is leaving people vulnerable and exposed,

particularly to the effects of extreme climate change. Some \$2 million went to support and maintain the dam at Derna. At a time of dire political chaos, in all likelihood that money was never spent on civil infrastructure. Even at the collapse of the dam, the United Nations could not get its people into Derna to help with the aid relief. The Libyan authorities even refused entry to a UN team who had gone to try to help. That is the reality for people living in Derna and in Libya at the moment.

We must understand that we have a responsibility. There are consequences of localised or national instability, but also global considerations, which the United Kingdom must address if it is to help the most vulnerable people, particularly in the face of a climate emergency. As always, climate change bites harder at those who are least responsible for its creation, and what we have seen in Libya is the all too painful reality caused by political insecurity and instability. We must take responsibility. If we do not, the situation in Libya is only going to get worse.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East talked about the people-smuggling and drug-smuggling—all products of a failed state. We and our young people will suffer when that reaches our shore. We must tackle this at source, and that means investing properly in the future of Libya. We can never again get to a situation where we decide on regime change without a single thought or consideration for what it will mean further down the line. We must understand and see that what happened and what we did in Libya were not consequence-free. We are living with that at the moment.

In the time I have left, I will make the point that all this leads back to the real-life consequence of the Government's decision to slash their overseas aid budget. We are no longer at the forefront of countries giving support to African nations. When the Government look back on their decision to cut the 0.7% target, they really must ask themselves whether it was worth it. We are living with the consequences of that decision right now. The aid budget has never been more needed, as people's lives are being torn apart by war, by the consequences of climate disaster and, as I said, by living in a failed state. That might be a debate for another day.

I urge the Government to make assisting the people of Libya, and getting as much stability as possible, one of their main priorities. If they do not, we will live with the consequences for a long time to come.

10.8 am

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments made earlier about the situation we face in Israel and Gaza. I think I speak for everybody when I say that our hearts go out to those people who have lost their lives and to those people who may, sadly, lose their lives in the near future. We must do everything we can to secure peace in that troubled area.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on securing this important debate and on the incredibly knowledgeable and sensitive way in which he introduced it. He is a friend and colleague, and I know full well how much work he has done in this subject area over a long period of time. We really value and respect his knowledge. We have also heard about the background to where we are today; I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham

(Daniel Kawczynski) for the information he gave us, and I will cite him. I promise him that I will buy a copy of his book and read it as well.

Since the overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi, we have seen conflict and division in Libya. We have seen the involvement of foreign forces, and the Wagner Group is still present and holds territory. We have seen a ceasefire in the country and it is good that that ceasefire is largely holding, but we have nevertheless seen tremendous instability and insecurity for some time. I was mindful of the situation when I read a report by an international consultancy that was written earlier this month. I will quote from it because it is an accurate summary of the situation:

“The security situation will likely remain unstable nationwide...primarily due to intermittent fighting and armed clashes between various rival militia groups across the country. Competing governmental institutions, as well as geopolitical rivalries, have profoundly complicated the security situation in Libya. Kidnapping incidents, political assassinations, criminal activity, and clashes between opposing militia groups are the most severe problems.”

But that is not all. There is also growing instability in the south of the country because of the instability in the Sahel region. Militant organisations are developing there and intruding into Libya, causing further instability and worsening the migration crisis that so many countries in southern Europe face. That is the backdrop of the terrible disaster that occurred in the aftermath of Storm Daniel. We all saw the terrible scenes on our television screens following the breaking of two dams in the Derna valley. Estimates are still unclear, but some say that as many as 20,000 people may have lost their lives. Bodies are continually being recovered, and 48,000 people have been displaced in the region.

There are various suggestions as to why the dams broke, but it is clear to me that, despite international assistance, those dams had not been serviced properly and there was no insurance to make them safe. That is indicative of the malaise in the country. We also saw that in the difficulty with the international response to the disaster. It was evident that the governmental infrastructure was not in place to provide the framework for the international community to effectively deliver and administer aid.

We need a strong road map to bring a degree of political stability and democracy to the country. Just a few years ago, we saw efforts to create a road map. It was pencilled in that there should be presidential elections in December 2021. It is extremely disappointing that, despite the hopes at the time, those aspirations came to nothing and there were no direct elections. Since then, the instability has continued. It is extremely important that the United Kingdom, especially as it is a penholder on Libya at the United Nations, does everything possible to ensure that there is patience, stability, tenacity and, above all, hope for a political settlement and for elections to be held in the not-too-distant future.

I read the comments of the British permanent representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Barbara Woodward, with great interest and some hope. She said in a debate on Libya at the Security Council in June that it is important that the international community do everything it can to bring about “stability” and a “clear road map”. She stated that it was therefore necessary to have more discussions among as many stakeholders as

[Wayne David]

possible, and with the ordinary people themselves, to ensure that that road map had a large measure of support across the country. She also mentioned, correctly, that that was the hope of ordinary people in Libya. It is all too easy to forget what is vital for ordinary people's livelihood and, indeed, survival, but there is a coherent political framework. We tend to focus too much on political elites and what is appropriate for the so-called political class, when it is the people we should always be concerned about.

It is equally important that when we talk about a political framework, we do not talk in abstractions. Politics in Libya, perhaps more than in any other country currently, is about creating a framework for the people, to allow them to live their lives properly in peace and security. The ambassador cited her visit to Libya when she was taken to a World Health Organisation health centre project, partly funded by the United Kingdom. Despite all the difficulties surrounding that project, it is successful. There has been a British contribution of \$2.5 million. The project is important because it symbolises hope for the country. It offers the chance of proper healthcare, antenatal checks, dental treatment, primary care and much else besides. But for projects like that to flourish, a strong, coherent political framework is necessary.

I hope very much that the Minister can give a firm commitment that Britain will stay the course and that we will give support for as long as it takes to ensure that there is a political road map that leads to democratic elections. The days when we can think that what happens in one country some way away is of no relevance to us in this country are long gone. We live in a global community. What happens in one country, practically as well as morally, has an impact on our life in this country, so I hope that the Minister is able to reaffirm the British Government's commitment to ensuring that there is a coherent, well-supported road map that will come to fruition in the not-too-distant future.

10.17 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):**

As always, Ms McDonagh, it is an honour to see you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) on securing this debate. He has a wealth of knowledge on things international, particularly in the middle east. It is very unusual to see him in his current seat—I normally associate him with the Front Bench opposite me—but reshuffles are what they are.

I welcome the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) to his place, and I welcome his wise words on these important issues. It is good to hear that views are generally shared across the Chamber. There is a real responsibility to help the situation in Libya, and I assure the hon. Member that we are absolutely committed to that task.

As the whole House heard from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on Monday, following the absolutely abhorrent attacks on Israel, the Government are doing all they can to prevent instability spreading in the region. I therefore welcome even more the opportunity to debate our work on Libya in that context. Like other

Members, I send my condolences and those of His Majesty's Government to Israelis who have lost loved ones in the terrible attacks and to Palestinian people who are suffering. I am also very mindful of those here in the UK who feel threatened, whether by antisemitism or anti-Muslim views. This is a time for calm and for us to hold on to the British values of tolerance and mutual respect. I hope that that will continue over the days and weeks ahead.

I am grateful to Members for their contributions to this important debate and will seek to respond to their points. An inclusive, representative political dialogue is the only way to overcome the current impasse in Libya. The UK fully backs a Libyan-led, UN-facilitated political process, which offers the best route to peace and stability. Elections remain a clear goal, and addressing the obstacles that prevented them from taking place in December 2021 is key to getting Libya back on track. The UK is using our position as UN Security Council penholder and working alongside international partners to support the UN mission in Libya. It is clear from the response to the recent devastating floods that the status quo cannot deliver what the Libyan people need. The political impasse threatens stability in Libya and in the broader region, and the people of Libya are losing out every day.

Libya, as a country with enviable human and economic resources—as spelled out by my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski)—has the potential to be a global competitor on issues from healthcare to education, and a political settlement would unlock that potential. We also recognise the important role that a stable Libya could play, as a regional partner, in helping to address challenges from climate change to irregular migration, which has been mentioned a couple of times. The UK therefore supports initiatives on economic development and investment. UK and Libyan businesses have long worked hand in hand, with large volumes of trade between our two nations, totalling £1.5 billion in the past year. A thriving private sector can support stability, drive growth, create jobs and diversify the economy away from its dependence on oil revenues.

Although the UK and the international community are doing what we can, the onus must be, and is, on Libya's leaders to fulfil their responsibilities, to uphold peace and security, and to find a lasting and inclusive political settlement. We engage with them regularly, encouraging them to work constructively with UN Special Representative Bathily as he seeks to facilitate a political agreement to address the underlying issues that prevent elections. The hard-working and dedicated team in our embassy in Tripoli also engage with a wide range of political actors and civil society organisations to encourage inclusive dialogue and negotiations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham reminded us about important points of history, and I am sure his book sales will do even better given the considered and important points that he made. I re-emphasise that the priority of our embassy remains building and sustaining strong and enduring partnerships in all parts of the country. The official reopening of the British embassy in 2022 was a demonstration of the strength of our relationship with the whole of Libya. The UK has played and continues to play a central role in supporting Libya on its path to becoming a more



democratic and stable country. As I said to the hon. Member for Caerphilly, we are absolutely committed to continuing that task.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** Following our intervention in Libya, there are allegations that Haftar and his sons are committing serious human rights abuses against the people of Libya and are working with the Wagner Group. There is increasing Russian influence in eastern Libya. I very much hope that the Minister will address those points. At the very least—I have tabled written parliamentary questions on this—may we have an assurance from the British Government that sanctions will be placed on the Haftar regime if those people are proven to be carrying out abuses against their own citizens?

**David Rutley:** I thank my hon. Friend for those points. The UK is committed to ensuring that the Libyan sanctions regime set out in UN Security Council resolution 1970 is fit for purpose by working closely with the 1970 committee. We are negotiating UN sanctions mandate renewal, and we expect that resolution to be adopted soon. My hon. Friend makes an important point about sanctions.

Significant points were made on some of the legacy issues. WPC Fletcher's death remains as shocking and senseless today as the day it occurred. I remember it well from the news reports at the time. It should not be forgotten.

The Lockerbie bombing was also referred to. The bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie on 21 December 1988 was a completely brutal act of terrorism. This year, on its 35th anniversary—I cannot believe it has been that long—we remember that tragic event and all the lives that have been blighted by its impact.

I want to highlight the importance of ensuring that we counteract the work that other countries are doing to exploit the instability in Libya to further their own malign objectives. We have heard today about the influence of Russia. Our efforts to stabilise Libya have been particularly disrupted by the Wagner Group's illegal actions in the country. We condemn the Russian Government and the Wagner Group for those actions, which are a clear violation of international law and the UN charter, and we call for the withdrawal of all foreign fighters in the region. The UK will continue to work with international partners to strengthen Libya's security institutions and combat extremism in the country. That includes supporting the development of national security institutions to ensure that they serve the interests of the Libyan people.

Libya has also been plagued by landmines and other explosives—the legacy of war. They not only pose a deadly risk to civilians, but hinder reconstruction and economic recovery. The UK has supported efforts to dispose of more than 6,000 mines, clear more than 400,000 square miles of minefields in the east—these are extraordinary figures—and train the first all-female de-mining team in Sirte.

As the hon. Members for Caerphilly and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) highlighted, the devastating floods have recently made a dire situation even worse. Many thousands of people have lost their lives, families have been torn apart and critical infrastructure, including hospitals and clean water supplies, has been badly damaged. The UN announced on 16 October that humanitarian

assistance, provided by more than 24 humanitarian organisations, has now reached more than 146,000 people in need of support and basic services. I am pleased to see that report, because in the urgent question that some of us were involved in a few weeks ago concern was expressed about whether aid and support would reach the frontline.

The UK responded quickly with lifesaving aid. On 16 September, we announced a package worth up to £10 million to respond both to the floods in Libya and to the earthquake in Morocco. That built on the £1 million allocated in response to the floods on 13 September, and we have also committed £2 million to the UN's flash appeal. On top of that, the UN announced \$10 million from its central emergency response fund, to which the UK is one of the largest donors. UK-funded aid to Libya has provided emergency shelter to 14,000 people, 800 portable solar lanterns, and water filters and hygiene kits for 10,000 people. We have also supported the deployment of three mobile medical teams to provide primary healthcare in flood-affected areas.

We have been clear with key stakeholders in Libya that reconstruction, which was also talked about in the debate, must include institutions from both the west and the east, with full transparency and oversight of the funding by reputable international institutions. We have also allocated £6 million towards the Libya conflict, stability and security fund programme this year, which is facilitating peace-building efforts. That includes developing community-level councils, supporting civil society organisations and collaborating with Chatham House to help key Libyan institutions to become more accountable and transparent.

The UK continues to stand firm in our support for peace and stability in Libya. The UN-facilitated, Libyan-led political process offers the best hope of achieving that, alongside our wider diplomatic, humanitarian and economic development work. Members can be assured that we will do all we can to continue to help the victims of the floods and to support reconstruction, and we will continue to work closely with international partners and leaders in-country to help the people of Libya on their path towards a better and brighter future in the years ahead.

10.29 am

**Fabian Hamilton:** I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, but I echo what the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) said: it is sad that there are not more Members here from both sides of the House, because Libya matters. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for his contribution as SNP spokesperson, and of course to my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who wound up the debate on behalf of the Opposition.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham for his incredibly deep knowledge, based on the research for his book. We all remember him writing it; it took him two years. He must have the deepest, most profound knowledge about Libya of any Member of this House. I did not know the history of his connection with Libya through his uncle and aunt during communist times in Poland—those dark days when to see an orange was something that brought joy and hope to everybody.

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

I hope that Libya can be re-established sooner rather than later as a country with a functioning democracy, Government and economy, because only therein lies the hope for not just the Libyan people, but the whole region. As every Member has said this morning, Libya matters not just to Libyans, but to all of us in Europe and across the region, so we need to work doubly hard. Peter Millett and others who advised me for this debate told me that Britain, above almost every other European country, is respected widely in Libya. We need to use that connection and friendship, and the contacts that the Minister explained are already being used for the benefit of both Britain and Libya, even harder to make sure that the country is reconstructed.

The worst thing about Libya that I have discovered, over years of studying it, is that countries across Europe and the region and across the world have interfered for their own selfish reasons and agendas and have made the situation far, far worse. We need to bring those nations together and say, “Stop. It’s time you stopped and let the Libyans themselves decide what their future will be, gave them aid accordingly and helped in every way to reconstruct that country.” Only when Libya is reconstructed will it take its place once again among the nations of this world and serve its people as it truly should. My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly made that point extremely strongly.

I have already thanked Peter Millett and the House of Commons Library, but I also pay tribute to the UK diplomats who are back in Tripoli once again—that is something that Peter was not able to do when he was our ambassador—for the work that they are doing. They need to be strengthened. I know that the Minister has been listening, and I know that the UK Government want to do this.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered support for stability in Libya.

10.33 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Railway Stations in Cumbria: Staffing Changes

11 am

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered staffing of railway stations in Cumbria.

It is an absolute privilege to serve under your guidance in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. The impact of the proposed staffing changes in Cumbria, including the loss of ticket offices, will be immense and entirely negative. With the conclusion of the consultation last month, those closures may be imminent, but the Government have the power to prevent them. That is why I am so pleased and grateful to have secured this debate at this crucial time.

I have a high regard for the Minister personally, and I am here to ask him to intervene directly to save our ticket offices in Cumbria and to prevent the removal of station staff. I draw his attention to the petition to stop the closures in Cumbria, which has been signed by more than 3,000 people. I am determined that our communities should be able to access our stations and be safe at them. Those stations should have knowledgeable professionals on hand to answer the questions we all have when we are rail users, and I want to ensure that the quality of rail travel is not further diminished because of these foolish and backward-looking proposals.

In South Lakeland and Eden alone, we face the closure of Avanti’s ticket offices at the mainline west coast stations at Penrith and Oxenholme. Penrith is set to have no ticket office and to have staff available for ticketing support from 9 am, rather than from 5.30 am. At Oxenholme station, it is a similar story: the ticket office is to close and staff are set to be on hand from 8 am rather than 5.45 am. We face the removal of ticket offices and massively reduced staffing at the Northern Rail-run stations at Appleby, Windermere, Grange-over-Sands and Ulverston.

Ulverston station, where mobility scooter users and people in wheelchairs are dependent on staff to assist them across the tracks to platform 3, will be staffed for just two hours a day, from 11 am to 1 pm, and not at all on Sundays. Grange-over-Sands station, situated in a town with a disproportionately older population, will also be staffed for just two hours a day, from 11.30 am to 1.30 pm, and not at all on Sundays. Appleby station, which has direct connections to Leeds, Carlisle and the Yorkshire Dales national park, will be staffed for just four hours a day, from 9 am to 1 pm, and not at all on Sundays. Windermere station, in the heart of the Lake district—Britain’s biggest visitor destination after London—will be staffed for just three and a half hours a day, from 10 am to 1.30 pm, and, again, not at all on Sundays.

The staff who will be present for those brief periods are to be called “journey makers”, but they will not be able to sell anyone a ticket directly. They are there only to give people guidance on how to use the ticket machines on the platform, many of which do not take cash, by the way—a feature that merely adds to the heap of barriers to access that the changes entail.

For the mainline stations at Oxenholme and Penrith, the proposals mean a huge reduction in the quality and availability of support, but for the branch line stations at Appleby, Windermere, Grange-over-Sands and Ulverston,

the proposals are devastating. They effectively amount to the de-staffing of those stations, to the enormous detriment of rail users and the wider community. Unstaffed stations are unsafe stations, especially for solo travellers and even more so for women.

Unstaffed stations are inaccessible stations, too. I met William in Appleby a couple of weeks ago. He is visually impaired and cannot use the ticket machine at the station. To travel, he needs a staffed ticket office. If the changes go through, he will be able to use his local station only on the rare occasions that the “journey maker” happens to be present. Last month, I met volunteers at Sight Advice South Lakes in Kendal, most of whom have visual impairments. They told me the same story as William: de-staffed stations are, for them, unusable stations.

At Grange-over-Sands, a town with a larger, older population where the station really is a lifeline for hundreds of people, the de-staffing of the station will render it inaccessible to many. Lillian and Mohammed from Levens village, who use the station regularly, tell me that because of Mohammed’s disability—he is a wheelchair user—they need a staffed station to help with such things as the ramp to get him on and off the train.

At Ulverston, people with mobility issues need to use the crossing across the tracks to get to platform 3. They can do that only when a member of staff is present, yet the plan is for that station to be staffed for just two hours a day and not at all on Sundays. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell)—my constituency neighbour—and the disability access campaigner Tony Jennings have also rightly brought the matter to the Minister’s attention.

It is my privilege to chair the public transport group Cumbria Better Connected, and in that role I joined the hon. Member, Cumbria Tourism, Cumbria local enterprise partnership, Morecambe Bay Partnership, the RMT, Ulverston business improvement district, local rail users groups and local Westmorland and Furness councillors in sending a letter to the Secretary of State this summer outlining our objections to the plans that the rail companies have put on the table. The Minister replied:

“No currently staffed station should be unstaffed as a result of industry changes, and operators should ensure that staff are well located to meet passenger needs in future. This includes ensuring that staff are available to assist those who need additional support or do not wish to use digital tickets.”

The Minister knows that the proposals to de-staff our branch line stations for at least 80% of the time are not compliant with his pledge in that letter, so he surely cannot permit the proposals to happen.

Further to that, in a debate on ticket office closures in Westminster Hall on 13 September, the Minister stated:

“I do not expect a material reduction in the number of hours where ticketing expertise is available at stations...it is important to note that the volume of hours is similar to what we currently have.”—[*Official Report*, 13 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 346WH.]

But that is not the case for the proposals at Oxenholme or Penrith, and it is especially not the case at Grange, Windermere, Appleby or Ulverston. Given that all the train companies are proposing job losses—2,300 job losses in all—as a result of their ticket office closure plans nationwide, it is surely not possible for the volume of staffing hours to be even remotely similar to what we have now, and certainly the consultation does not indicate

that that is the intention. Did the Minister mean what he said in this place a month ago? If so, would I be right in assuming that he plans to block the proposals, and that in fact there will not be the job losses proposed by the rail operators?

It seems obvious to me, and I assume it is obvious to the Minister, that the proposals for our stations in Cumbria completely go against his criteria. How on earth can passengers’ needs be met when Appleby station will be staffed for just four hours a day, Windermere for just three and a half hours, Ulverston and Grange stations for a mere two hours each, and none of them staffed at all on Sundays? The loss of ticket offices and our excellent ticket office staff would be a desperate step backwards, and an incredibly foolish and short-sighted one.

The train operators justify their proposals to close ticket offices and de-staff stations by saying that only 12% of passengers book their tickets directly at the ticket office. That is misleading, because it is not the case at our stations. At Appleby, for instance, 39% of all travellers book their tickets at the station office. At Grange and Ulverston stations, more tickets were bought at booking offices than through the electronic machines for every one of the last three years. Even for those who arrive at the station with a ticket, many still have questions that need answering. I am at Oxenholme nearly every week, and the excellent, cheerful ticket office staff are always being asked for advice by rail users. Most arrive with their tickets, but they perhaps lack answers to key questions about their journeys, especially when there are delays and cancellations, as is almost always the case these days.

The proposals are also stupid from a management point of view, because they are enormously demoralising to the entire rail workforce, whether staff work on platforms, in ticket offices or on trains. Have industry bosses and the Minister not noticed the ongoing industrial relations dispute? What possessed them to think that now is the right moment to cleverly pour petrol on that fire by seeking to force through unnecessary changes that damage the industry and morale?

The impact on our economy will be significant, too. In Cumbria, we have 20 million visitors a year. As I have been collecting signatures for our petition to save the ticket offices, I have been talking to passengers at Oxenholme, Appleby, Grange-over-Sands and Windermere. One thing that struck me is that many of those who were keen to sign were tourists. Indeed, at Windermere, the very first four signatories were from Israel, Abu Dhabi, Switzerland and Pakistan. By the way, they all already had their ticket. They were all uncertain about connections, timings and delays and would all be left high and dry if Ministers permit the closures.

Our tourism economy employs 60,000 people in Cumbria. It is our biggest employer by far, generating £3.5 billion a year for our economy. It is unacceptable that our visitors should have their experience so badly damaged by the proposed decisions. Westmorland and Furness Council and the Lake District national park authority are striving to get visitors to come to the lakes but leave their cars at home to protect our world-class landscapes from pollution and congestion. It is not right that that vital work should be undone by a proposal that would downgrade the main railway station in the English Lake district. By the way, many of those who

[Tim Farron]

arrive in the lakes as tourists are international visitors who come to the UK via Manchester airport, where TransPennine Express is planning to halve the opening hours of the railway station ticket office. That is a cut in Manchester that would do damage to the economy of the lakes.

The closure of ticket offices at the mainline stations is equally a backward step. At Oxenholme and Penrith stations, staff will not be available for ticket sales or advice until after the first several trains of the day have been and gone. How can that be an improvement in service? The loss of the physical ticket offices is also a foolish thing. Having staff at a designated ticket office means that passengers always know precisely where they can find help and advice, rather than having to scour the platform to see whether they can find a shivering employee randomly stood in an unspecified location. Furthermore, has it occurred to the Minister that the screens in the ticket offices can play an important role? Sadly, staff sometimes find themselves on their own, confronted by agitated and occasionally potentially violent people. It is not right to force them to lose that important shield.

The Beeching cuts of the 1960s were a tragic, myopic error on a huge scale, causing lasting and largely irreparable damage to our transport infrastructure, our environment and our communities. The minds behind that colossal own goal concluded that the arrival of the shiny new motorways and mass private car ownership rendered many of our railways redundant; they were yesterday's news or old hat. Yet, looking back, few decisions can count as being as destructive or as stupid as the Beeching cuts.

What lesson do we learn from that devastating mistake? It is surely this: that we must not be hasty to throw away the old just because something new has come along. Then, the old was the railways, and the new was the motorways. Today, the old is human beings and human interactions, and the new is technology that allows us to book tickets and manage our journeys online. The new technology is good and most of us use it, but to arrogantly assume that we are on the right side of history if we blot out the human infrastructure of our railways is to invite the same ridicule and derision in future that most of us feel today towards Beeching and the politicians who foolishly followed his recommendations.

In the debate in this Chamber on 13 September, the Minister said:

"I have no role in the consultation at this stage".—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 13 September 2023; Vol 737, c. 346WH.]

Throughout the process, the Government have tried to maintain that it is industry-led. But that is not really true, is it? Documents released via a freedom of information request confirm not only that the Government had to sign off each company's proposal before it went for public consultation, but that they were advising the train companies what to do with their closed ticket offices afterwards and were encouraging them to consider renting them out for retail use—and all of that was before the public consultations were even launched.

The proposals to de-staff our stations and damage our railways are not some regrettable imposition by an alien force beyond the Minister's control. They are

proposals from rail operators who are answerable to him and the Secretary of State—proposals that he has the power to quash. If he thinks these damaging proposals are a good thing for Cumbria, the Conservatives must stand behind them and accept responsibility. If they think they are a bad thing, what is the point of them being in office if they will not do the right thing and stop them? If the Minister wanted to call a halt to this process, he could. If he wanted to and if the Prime Minister wanted to, he could save our ticket offices with the stroke of a pen. On behalf of the people of Cumbria, our excellent station staff and our millions of visitors, I call on him to do just that.

11.15 am

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this important debate on staffing changes and ticket offices in his constituency. I know from a chance meeting with him in his constituency that he works hard for his constituents. I was walking in the Lake district and stumbled across a "Meet your MP" sign—and there he was, so we turned it into "Meet your MP and someone else's MP." I thank him for his kind words at the opening of the debate.

Together with the rail industry, we want to improve and modernise the experience for passengers by moving staff out from behind the ticket office screens to provide more help and advice in customer-focused roles. There are currently about 980 Department for Transport-regulated ticket offices for stations managed by the Department for Transport-contracted operators; 43% of them currently do not have any ticket office facility. People are still able to use those stations to access trains.

There has been a huge shift in the way passengers purchase tickets at railway stations: about one in every 10 transactions in 2022-23 took place in a ticket office, down from about one in three 10 years ago. Despite that, our stations have hardly changed in the past 10 years, which means that staff are constrained to work in ticket offices although they could serve passengers better on station platforms and concourses, where all the passengers could be served.

I am pleased that the rail industry launched consultations on the future of ticket offices under the ticketing and settlement agreement process, which gave the public and stakeholders an opportunity to scrutinise the train operating companies' proposals to ensure that they work in the best possible way for passengers. The consultations, which ended on 1 September, yielded more than 680,000 responses. We are now in a period in which the independent passenger bodies, which comprise Transport Focus and London TravelWatch, are engaging with the train operators on the basis of the consultation responses that they have received and the criteria that they have set out.

I expect train operators to work collaboratively with the passenger bodies in the remaining weeks, to respond to the concerns raised and to define their proposals accordingly. Where agreement cannot be reached between the operators and the passenger bodies, individual cases may be referred to the Secretary of State for Transport for a decision. At that point, he will look to the Secretary of State's ticketing and settlement agreement ticket office guidance. The TSA guidance is clear that a wide

range of factors should be considered, including the impact of proposals on customer support, security at stations, modernised retail practices such as the availability of pay-as-you-go ticketing, and support for passengers with disabilities, accessibility or other equalities-related needs.

It remains important that we reform the railway to enable staff to provide a more flexible, agile and personal service, creating the modern experience that people expect. We should also look for ways to ensure value for money for the UK taxpayer. I know from listening to constituents and parliamentarians that there is indeed interest in what will happen to ticket office staff, should there be any changes. Indeed, as part of my visit across the railway over the summer, I visited Appleby station in the constituency of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, as he said.

The changes are about modernising the passenger experience by moving expert ticket office staff to be more visible and accessible around the station. As only 10% of tickets are sold across the ticket office counter, that means that most passengers are not in contact with ticket office staff. The idea is to take the member of staff on to the platform or concourse to help the passengers where they need it. That includes purchasing tickets via a ticket machine or online.

As the hon. Member mentioned, I reiterated at the last Westminster Hall debate, which was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), that—crucially—the Secretary of State and I have been clear that our expectation is that no currently staffed stations will be unstaffed as a result of the reform, with staff still there to provide assistance and additional support for those who need and want it. That includes advice on tickets and assistance in buying them. I also reiterated that I do not expect a material reduction in the number of hours where ticketing expertise is available at stations in the manner that some have described and that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale set out for the stations in his own constituency. I expect that by the end of the consultation process, there will be a differing design. When we talk about redeployment, it

is important to note that the volume of hours should be similar to what we currently have. He will no doubt make note of those words.

Should ticket offices close following the process, we would expect staff to be redeployed and multi-skilled to provide advice and assistance across stations. Exact arrangements will vary operator by operator and will be the subject of collective bargaining with the trade unions. It is vital that our railway is accessible to all, and I have engaged directly with accessibility groups and will continue to do so. Alongside that, train operators are required to take into account the adequacy of the proposed alternatives in relation to the needs of passengers who are disabled, and to include that in the notice of the proposals sent to other operators and passenger groups. Operators had prepared equality impact assessments, and they were available on their websites during the consultation.

The Office of Rail and Road's latest annual consumer report highlights that Passenger Assist booking has significantly increased since last year and that disabled people have returned to the railway largely in line with overall trends. For that reason, I firmly believe that the proposal to bring staff out from behind glass screens, to help the increased number of people who need assistance from the platform on to trains, is a step in the right direction in terms of the multi-skilling roles that I have described.

I reiterate that by bringing station staff out from behind the ticket office screen, we envisage an improved and modernised experience for passengers using the railways. It is vital that we bring forward reforms through considering changes in passenger behaviour, involving technologies and ensuring value for money for the taxpayer, while ensuring that assistance and support continue for those who require it most. I look forward to the process continuing in the design stage that I have described.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.23 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Green Energy: Ports

[JUDITH CUMMINS *in the Chair*]

*[Relevant documents: Second Report of the Welsh Affairs Committee, Floating Offshore Wind in Wales, HC 1182, and the Government response, HC 1405; Second Report of the Welsh Affairs Committee of Session 2019–21, Freeports and Wales, HC 205, and the Government response, HC 667.]*

2.30 pm

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered ports and green energy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins—for the first time, I believe. I look forward to the next 90 minutes. I almost thought I saw the Minister cursing under his breath as he sat down for yet another debate; I keep dragging him back here to talk about issues that are close to my heart and to the interests of my constituency in Pembrokeshire. I am grateful to have secured time for this debate.

This is an important topic, for a couple of reasons. First, quite simply, without a thriving port sector attracting the necessary new infrastructure investment, I do not believe that we will be able to meet the ambitious targets that we have set to protect our energy security and renew our energy system as we work towards net zero. Secondly, a new generation of investment in our ports, based around a long-term vision for renewable energy, has the potential to make a significant contribution to addressing some of the economic inequalities and deprivation that we see in too many of our port communities.

I believe that ports can be an engine for local economic renewal and the key to a new energy future for the whole United Kingdom. That is the essential message that I hope to convey in my short remarks this afternoon. The key question I want to pose is this: what are the steps, decisions and interventions that His Majesty's Government can take to support and shape this new future for our ports, while recognising that it is the private sector investors and developers who will ultimately need to make that vision a reality?

Nowhere is that more clearly in focus than in my constituency of Preseli Pembrokeshire. The port of Milford Haven is the UK's most important energy port, hosting major oil refining and petroleum import and export terminals, two liquefied natural gas import and regasification terminals, and one of the UK's largest and most efficient gas-fired power stations. The port looks forward to a future in which offshore wind and hydrogen will play a central role as our energy system changes. I will make some specific remarks later about the situation at Milford Haven in the context of its relationship with Port Talbot; together, those two south Wales ports form the Celtic Freeport enterprise. I am sure that the points I make will come as no surprise to the Minister, because he has been generous in giving me lots of time over the past year or two to talk about the vision that is emerging there. He has been extremely helpful in his work to take that forward.

As we are an island nation, it seems almost trite and blindingly obvious to say that ports are an essential part of our economy as gateways for vital imports and

valuable exports. However, I do not think that that point is appreciated enough, partly because while some ports have flourished in recent times, others have not. In too many of our port communities, there is a sense that they are no longer quite as central to our economic life as they once were when the structure of the UK economy looked very different. Many ports have seen a steep decline in trade and industrial activity without seeing new industries and sectors emerging to fully plug the gap.

I believe that the green energy revolution offers a turning point for many of our ports. There is a broad consensus shared across the Government, the Opposition and large swathes of industry about the increasing importance of renewable energy in our energy mix and about the need for less reliance on imported hydrocarbons. With the impact of climate change brought increasingly into focus following the supply and price impacts of the war in Ukraine, we can see the net zero and energy security agendas coming together in a very potent way. The need to deliver home-grown, affordable and sustainable energy has never been greater. Our ports are right at the heart of meeting that challenge.

It is worth saying that Britain does not exist in isolation when it comes to this agenda. Across Europe, North America and indeed the whole world, many other countries are looking at this—just look at the efforts being made by major ports across Europe to get ready by upgrading their infrastructure to enable a big increase in renewable energy. We can see that at Bilbao, Brest, Rotterdam and other locations across Europe. We are in an internationally competitive environment. One point that I want to leave with the Minister today is that, for all the ambition we have and the vision that we have set out and are pursuing, we need to recognise that others are doing so as well. Given the competition for investment and capital, often from large global companies, we need to be getting our skates on and making good progress.

Ports have a major role to play in delivering on the renewable energy vision, and not just as transit points or entry and exit points for materials; they also have the potential to be hubs for manufacturing, energy generation, operations, maintenance and servicing. Just as in another era our ports acted as cradles of the industrial revolution, I think they can be cradles of a new green industrial revolution, based on the vision that I have been outlining.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate, to which I have come purely so that I can hijack it by singing the virtues of Shoreham harbour, the closest cross-channel harbour to London. He mentioned green hubs, and I absolutely agree with his comments about flexibility and the renaissance in our ports.

Shoreham harbour has put solar panels on its sheds. It has wind turbines. It helps to service the Rampion wind farm just offshore, which will expand to power more than 1.2 million homes across Sussex. It is becoming a hydrogen hub, working with Ricardo engineering, which retrofits engines to be run on hydrogen. Shoreham wants to produce its own hydrogen as well as importing it, and it will be an important centre for net zero through the Sussex bay kelp project, where carbon capture by seaweed is even greater than by trees. Is

Shoreham not a great example of flexibility, adaptability and the huge potential of the green revolution, which can also apply to the whole United Kingdom?

**Stephen Crabb:** I am grateful for the very concise way in which my hon. Friend has sung the virtues of his local port. He draws attention to an extremely important point. Very rarely are we talking about individual technologies in isolation; often they come together as a mix. There are so many synergies from different companies working together, as we can see at so many ports around the United Kingdom. It is really encouraging to see so many colleagues in the Chamber from so many different parts of the United Kingdom, hopefully looking to share in the vision that we are talking about.

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): On the subject of ports, I should not let the moment pass without mentioning Peterhead and the nearby St Fergus gas terminal. As my right hon. Friend will know, it is the site of the Acorn carbon capture and storage project, which, when completed, will have import capability that perhaps exporters of carbon dioxide from his constituency will take advantage of.

**Stephen Crabb:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention. Banff and Buchan is a constituency with which I am very familiar, as he knows, and there are some exciting things happening. For a long time the north-east of Scotland was associated with fishing and oil, but there is a lot more to talk about now, so I look forward to hearing further contributions from him this afternoon.

To encourage the investment required for all the ports that we have an interest in and are talking about this afternoon, the targets that the Government are setting are really important because they set the level of ambition and send a signal to investors in the marketplace about what the Government want.

There are two documents that are particularly important in describing the opportunities flowing from the new energy environment that we are in. One is the energy security strategy published in April last year; the other, which was published in March this year, is "Powering Up Britain", which speaks to the role of new renewable technologies in our energy mix and outlines the scale of the ambition. Because of my local port and our proximity to the Celtic sea, I have a particular interest in the Government's ambitions for floating offshore wind. In those two Government documents, I believe there lies a major new industrial opportunity for our nation.

The targets that have been set include 5 GW of floating offshore wind, 10 GW of low-carbon hydrogen production capacity, up to 70 GW of new solar, and an ambition for between 20 million and 30 million tonnes per annum of carbon storage. That is an exciting and ambitious set of targets that the Government are setting out. Meeting them will require a lot of work and a lot of investment, and ports will be right at the centre of it.

Different ports will undoubtedly offer different capabilities according to size, location, local skills mix and local supply chains. It is too easy to say that there will be something for everyone, but if the floating offshore wind sector in the Celtic sea plays anything like the role that the Government are setting out for it in

"Powering Up Britain", it will generate new activity in multiple port locations across south Wales and south-west England.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. The truth is that we still do not have any floating offshore wind projects up and running in the Celtic sea. That leads me on to the final section of my speech, in which I will outline the significance of what we have in my constituency at Milford Haven, as well as summarising the key asks that I want to put to the Government.

**Dr Dan Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I feel this is an appropriate juncture to intervene. My right hon. Friend will be aware of the importance of Felixstowe port in Suffolk, which has almost 50% of the UK's container trade. Through strategic investment, there is a great opportunity for the Government not only to support the economic growth of ports, but to support them in delivering the decarbonising agenda. In the case of Felixstowe, investment in the Ely junction will make a significant difference by potentially improving freight rail capacity to the port. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging the Minister to recommit today to the Government securing timely funding for upgrading that junction and others in the east of England? That will allow improved freight transport to Felixstowe, will help to decarbonise the transport of goods to the port and will improve its economic capacity.

**Stephen Crabb:** I am grateful for that intervention. I am not familiar with the specifics of what my hon. Friend is talking about, but as I am generally in favour of upgrading junctions, I will echo his call to the Minister to support the investment required. His point about decarbonisation is really important; I might say a few words myself about decarbonisation in the context of the local energy industry in Milford Haven.

In the port of Milford Haven, we have the UK's single largest cluster of energy-related businesses, with high-capacity oil and gas pipelines, electricity connections and a wide range of conventional oil and gas companies, as I referred to earlier. The energy sector in Pembrokeshire supports the employment of 5,000 skilled workers across Wales and the employment of many hundreds more throughout the wider supply chain.

Last week, alongside representatives of many companies at the port, I had the pleasure of celebrating the delivery of the 1,000th cargo of liquefied natural gas at the South Hook LNG terminal. This afternoon we are talking about the green energy revolution, but the truth—this is a point that the Minister understands very well—is that we will rely on oil and gas for decades to come, and the terminals in my constituency that have done a lot of the heavy lifting in the last couple of years in enhancing UK energy security will be as vital as ever. Those conventional energy companies are themselves taking huge strides and making big investments to decarbonise, reduce their own carbon footprint and fit in with the framework of policy and ambition that the Government have set out.

I commend those companies—South Hook LNG, Dragon LNG, the Valero oil refinery, the Puma oil import terminal—which are all part of a cluster around the Milford Haven waterway that is sharing best practice and working together. They are part of the wider south Wales industrial cluster, which has been charged by the

[Stephen Crabb]

Government with the mission of leading decarbonisation efforts. I look forward to hearing the remarks of my friend the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock). The south Wales corridor—from Milford Haven in the west with its big hydrocarbon plants, through to Port Talbot with the enormous Tata steelworks, and then to Newport and the border of England at Gwent—accounts for a major chunk of Wales's overall carbon emissions, so the south Wales industrial cluster's efforts to decarbonise are vital. The Government support them, but it would be good for Ministers to engage even more with the cluster and particularly, from my point of view, with the energy cluster in Pembrokeshire.

In October last year, I led a debate in Westminster Hall about floating offshore wind. I will not repeat everything I said about the new industrial opportunity for Wales and south-west England that lies in the Celtic sea, but I underline the point that this is not some piece of green idealism. The Government's targets for reaching net zero and ensuring a greater degree of energy security require industrial development in the Celtic sea on a very large scale. Milford Haven is in an ideal geographic location for the Celtic sea developments.

Milford Haven also has more than 50 years of energy industry skills and heritage. Many companies in the local supply chain are well able to adapt and are excited about the potential new opportunities from floating offshore wind. More than 20 companies have expressed an interest as potential developers in floating offshore wind projects in the Celtic sea, including large companies such as RWE and Equinor, which have global footprints and are already investing in Pembrokeshire ahead of the opening up of the Celtic sea. Other companies such as Floventis are already working with local schools and colleges to look at what kind of skills will be required and to excite young people about the green energy revolution. We will need many more people going into technical trades—more welders, pipe fitters, marine engineers, navigators and people who can work offshore—as well as project planners and all the other highly skilled jobs that are required to deliver such projects. It is an exciting time down in Milford Haven.

Let me wrap up by summarising a few asks of the Government. The first—the Minister has heard me ask this before, but I will ask it again—is that it would be great if he could visit Milford Haven, sit down with some of the companies that I am talking about, and get a sense of the excitement and the work that is happening. The previous Secretary of State made a fleeting visit in the middle of August to RWE's net zero centre at its power station in Pembroke, but we need the Minister to engage with the whole sector. He has previously committed to coming down. Transport to west Wales is appalling—the Welsh Government need to pull their finger out when it comes to running train services, but that is a debate for another day—so it is difficult to get to. There are so many good Scottish colleagues present, so I will make the point that, given the number of visits that Scottish constituencies get, it would be great if Wales could have some of that as well. That is my first ask: come to Pembrokeshire and see what is happening.

Secondly, the bidding process for the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme closed recently. I have written to the Secretary of State, copying in the

Treasury. I strongly support Milford Haven's application for FLOWMIS funding. I have made this point previously, and I will make it again this afternoon: if this fund is to help unlock strategic investment in port infrastructure, it has to be used in a targeted way. I love levelling-up funds—I love the way they are used and spread around—but this is not a levelling-up fund. It has to be used to encourage private developers to release their funding, to incentivise and to send a market signal. I encourage the use of that money. There is £160 million. It should be more, and hopefully it could be more. I would like to see Milford Haven and the port of Port Talbot in south Wales get their asks. Investment is needed in both locations. Everyone who is considering the industry of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea will agree that Milford Haven and Port Talbot are the two western-facing ports in the Celtic sea where this will happen first.

Thirdly, we appreciate the support that the UK Government have given to establishing the Celtic freeport. I am delighted that Milford Haven, and Port Talbot 70 miles away, have a twinned arrangement and are partners in the Celtic freeport enterprise. A lot of work remains to be done on the governance and on getting the freeport up and running and doing its thing. I ask the Minister to show a real interest in that and to meet representatives of the Celtic freeport to capture their vision of how they want to use that to incentivise investment, particularly in supply chains, so that floating offshore wind does not happen in the same way as fixed-bottom offshore wind, where we ended up relying on companies based and doing work overseas. We want much more of the work for this new industry to be based in and close to our constituencies in south Wales.

My fourth ask of the Minister is on working with the Crown Estate, which I know he already does. If the Minister looks at what the Crown Estate has said ahead of its next leasing round, he will see that it is emphasising the importance of developers working with what they describe as integration ports. These are the ports where the kit is going to be assembled, and these are enormous pieces of kit. I take my hat off to Dan Labbad and his team, who are doing a very good job, but it is important that the plan that the Crown Estate is working on aligns with what the UK Government are doing. That aligned leadership is going to be important if we are going to make those strides and get the industry off the ground.

I was going to make a final point about contracts for difference, but the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will be leading an excellent Westminster Hall debate on that subject tomorrow afternoon, so I will let him make those points. I am sure that he and I think the same about the issue.

I will leave it there. I look forward to hearing from other Members.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. I remind Members that I am planning to start Front-Bench speeches at around 3.28 pm.

2.53 pm

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins. I thank the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing this vital debate. It has been a real pleasure working with him cross-party in the interests



of our two communities, and communities right across the south Wales corridor and the whole of Wales and the United Kingdom. What we are discussing today genuinely has UK-wide significance. We worked together to develop and deliver the successful Celtic freeport bid, and I look forward to further collaborating on maximising the benefits it will bring.

Britain's ports are both the gateways and the drivers of so much economic activity in the UK and, in turn, are crucial to the prosperity of British people and their families. From the food shipped into Britain's supermarket shelves to the exporting of British goods sold overseas, our ports play a crucial role both in the everyday lives of families across the UK and in the growth and success of hundreds of thousands of British businesses. As well as adding close to £7 billion to the UK economy, ports employ more than 100,000 people directly, and more than that again in their supply chains, meaning that they are pivotal to supporting local economies and providing communities with good job opportunities. British ports transport around 60 million international and domestic tourists in and out of the country every year.

Today I want to focus on the once-in-a-generation opportunity represented by the new industry of floating offshore wind and the crucial role that the ports will play. The Celtic sea and Wales's geography offer us a significant competitive advantage that we cannot afford to squander. We must seize this opportunity to place ourselves at the forefront of the green industrial revolution, just as Wales was the cradle of the first industrial revolution two centuries ago. Floating offshore wind has the potential to deliver 16,000 new jobs and could land £1.7 billion of investment in port infrastructure and manufacturing in south Wales. FLOW offers the opportunity to unlock a truly game-changing £54 billion of investment into the UK economy, with the Crown Estate aiming for approximately 25 GW by 2045. Indeed, the first 1 GW of projects alone is anticipated to create 5,000 jobs.

Our Port Talbot port has both the space and the steel to manufacture these giant structures, while Milford Haven, as the right hon. Member has pointed out, can provide energy storage facilities and a whole range of other vital components for this huge opportunity. This is a global market and we are in a global race for green investment. Port infrastructure needs to be ready ahead of time to capture first-mover advantage for Wales, so that we can land investment in port infrastructure and manufacturing to generate good job opportunities and deliver energy security. Without the first-mover advantage, Wales and the UK risk repeating the experience of earlier waves of offshore and onshore wind development, where the jobs and investment ended up going to other countries.

So what do we need to do to seize these opportunities? First, we need to make sure that the port infrastructure is built. The port and the prospective developers need certainty. They need assurances that the market will reach its full 24 GW capacity. Of course, the first round of FLOW, as confirmed by the Crown Estate, is only set at 4.5 GW, but it is the long-term line of sight on this and the pipeline that we really need to focus on. Associated British Ports is developing its plans for Port Talbot at pace, investing more than £500 million in developing a major floating offshore wind integration assembly port and a wider green energy hub. But the length of the

leasing window by the Crown Estate is of crucial importance. We need a clear outline of the development window to that 24 GW target for flow in the Celtic sea. This is to act as a clear signal in that FLOW global market. Could I ask the Minister to outline the steps he is taking to secure clarity about the long-term pipeline?

Secondly, Wales must get its fair share of the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme programme. There is a pot totalling £160 million for the whole of the UK. Welsh ports must get their fair share of that pot. It is critical that the UK Government understand the enormous potential for Welsh ports to deliver this game-changing new industry. We need the UK Government to back the two very strong bids from Port Talbot and Milford Haven for FLOWMIS funding. Could the Minister update us on FLOWMIS and assure us that Wales will get its fair share?

Thirdly, Aberavon in Wales will secure maximum benefit from floating offshore wind only if the developers are held to firm supply chain commitments. The Crown Estate must get this right when awarding licences. We must ensure that local supply chains are developed for the manufacture of turbines and their sub-structures as well as their operation and maintenance. We cannot have a situation, for example, where these structures are built in China or somewhere else and merely assembled and serviced at Welsh ports. That is the case with the Scottish SSE wind farms, for example, which use no British steel whatever. We must use local steel. Tata Steel can adapt and reconfigure its production processes if it knows what the order book looks like, but it needs that advance warning. Could I ask the Minister to tell us what steps he is taking to secure those supply chain commitments right from the outset of the Crown Estate licensing process?

2.59 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

3.13 pm

*On resuming—*

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** The debate may now continue until 4.15 pm.

**Stephen Kinnock:** Thank you, Mrs Cummins. I will try to pick up where I left off.

On the planning side, the Government need to find a solution to the national grid's capacity issues. The National Grid says it has to develop up to five times as much energy infrastructure over the next seven years as it has developed over the past 30 years, such is the clamour for net zero projects, in terms of both energy generation and demand. How will the UK Government and, more specifically, the Minister work with the National Grid to end the gridlock, and how will they send a clear message to developers that these problems are going to be fixed?

That brings me to my next point, which is about the administrative strike price. Allocation round 5 was a shambles, with no bidders for offshore wind. We need the UK Government urgently to reshape the contracts for difference for AR6 and make them more attractive to developers if we are to realise Britain's potential to become a world leader on FLOW.

[Stephen Kinnock]

Finally, the UK and Welsh Governments must work collaboratively. We cannot allow bureaucracy to slow us down. Planning and consenting for major infrastructure is devolved. We need the UK Government to look for ways to support the Welsh Government to ensure that current capacity and resource blockages for planning and consenting are resolved to ensure that the seabed licensing is accelerated and that port infrastructure in Wales is ready in time. We also need strong cross-Whitehall co-ordination. I worry that the large number of Government Departments involved means that the process is not as streamlined as it should be. Perhaps the Minister could say what he will do to knock heads together to unlock all of the blockages.

This is a huge, game-changing opportunity for Aberavon, Wales and the entire United Kingdom. Ports play an absolutely crucial role in this opportunity. I look forward to the Minister's comments so that we can find a pathway towards maximising the opportunities before us.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I gently ask Members to make contributions of about four minutes so that we can get everybody in?

3.16 pm

**Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I apologise that I will have to leave before the end of the debate for a meeting at 4 o'clock.

I thank and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this debate. I agreed with everything he said and noted his slight jealousy of how Scottish Conservative MPs are so good at cheering Ministers who come up to our constituencies. He also mentioned how bad the transport is in Labour-run Wales. It is also pretty bad in SNP-run Scotland, particularly if you are trying to get a ferry—but I digress. [*Interruption.*] Well, it's true.

I want to focus for a few minutes on the issues in my constituency of Moray. Buckie's proud history as a fishing harbour dates back many years, to 1878. It was the first large concrete harbour to be built in Scotland. We have seen a decline in fishing in Scotland over a number of years, so I was delighted when Buckie was chosen as the site for the operations and maintenance of the new Moray West offshore wind farm. That will bring 60 highly skilled jobs to the community of Buckie. I discussed this with the developer, Ocean Winds, and the local community at the opening event. This is not just about the jobs that are coming, important though they are; there will also be a long-term effect. The jobs will be there for the next three or four decades, so this vital work is coming to communities whose ports have experienced a downturn. It is long-term and highly skilled work.

Immediately before this debate, I met David Whitehouse from Offshore Energies UK. He has been doing a lot of work with oil and gas, but also with renewables and green energy. He was keen to speak about the opportunities available to ports across Scotland and the United Kingdom,

and about the UK Government's support to ensure that the infrastructure is there and is capable of taking us on to the next level.

The final area I want to look at is freeports in Scotland. I was delighted that one of the first announcements that the Prime Minister made after taking office was to deliver the two freeports in Scotland in conjunction with the Scottish Government. Our two Governments are working together to deliver freeports. I spoke to Calum MacPherson, the new chief executive officer of the Inverness and Cromarty freeport, which will have benefits for my Moray constituency and constituencies across the highlands. It is not just great news that we have a freeport there; it is levelling up in action, because that area has seen a decline in the working-age population. People will move to Cromarty and the area to support the tens of thousands of jobs that could be created as a result of the freeport.

The quayside depths provide Cromarty with an extremely exciting opportunity to be a real hub for the offshore renewable industry. Not only is it great that freeport status has come to both the highlands and the firth of Forth, but the jobs, investment and building up of the local community are being roundly welcomed by the vast majority of people. Sadly, some Scottish Government representatives are still against freeports, but I think the overwhelming majority of people in Scotland, particularly in the areas with freeport status, can see the benefits.

Work is being done to ensure that Scotland and its coast, and my Moray constituency, have the opportunity to be involved in the next stage of the offshore industry. Oil and gas is still an important industry in Scotland: 90,000 jobs rely on it. There is a strong future for it, as we have seen in polling this week. There are also opportunities in green renewables. I am delighted that the UK Government support that, and I am firmly behind them.

3.19 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for bringing the issue to Westminster Hall today. He has done so before. I have been here to support him in the past, and I do so again today with the same motive: I have always believed in net zero and green energy. Some people in my party perhaps may not have the same enthusiasm for it, but that is not the point; the point is that our party is committed to it, and we want Northern Ireland to contribute to net zero goals.

Hon. Members will be aware, from their constituencies, of the expansion of green ports across the UK. I for one want to ensure that Northern Ireland and my constituency of Strangford take part in this expansion, so it is good to participate in the debate. We all want to play a part in helping our society to turn greener. Northern Ireland has five ports, four of which are public trust ports; they are in Belfast, Londonderry, Warrenpoint and Coleraine. The fifth is Larne, which is privately owned by P&O. Northern Ireland also has three fishing ports: Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie, which lies on the Ards peninsula in my constituency of Strangford. While the right hon. Gentleman may not have had the Minister visit his constituency, I am pleased to say that he has visited Portaferry. He has been to Scotland and Northern Ireland, so I am sure he will eventually get to Wales.

The seaports are managed by the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority. I have worked closely with local fishermen in my constituency for years. Fishing is such an important industry for Northern Ireland, and across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. There is certainly scope to ensure that our local ports and harbours have the opportunity to become greener and more environmentally friendly. I welcome that and encourage everyone to support that, but the incentives need to be there to make that happen. The International Maritime Organisation has set the target of halving 2008 emissions by 2050—quite a big goal, but if we put our mind to it we can achieve it.

The strategy to reduce emissions is to increase electrification of ports and port handling processes, and to adopt future fuels such as liquified natural gas, hydrogen or ammonia. Globally, we need to come together as one to decarbonise shipping and ports, thus ensuring our target for net maritime CO<sub>2</sub> reduction is met. Everyone here knows where I stand: I am a great believer in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. With respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), we are always better together. We can do this better together, and I do not see any reason why it cannot happen.

Shell is developing a hydrogen hub through the port of Rotterdam and the Hollandse Kust wind farm, which aims to start production in 2023, so there are examples in other parts of Europe that we could replicate. The wind farm is expected to produce some 60,000 kg of hydrogen daily, which will fuel 2,300 hydrogen-powered goods vehicles per day. That is a scheme that could really work. I know the Minister has always been keen to tell us what the United Kingdom is doing, and we will hear some of that later on. Closer to home, the port of Aberdeen in Scotland has also taken action.

There is a great necessity for a solid and flexible energy system that complements local production of green energy with the import of renewable molecules. If port and harbour masters are to consider the benefits of a green future, Government incentives must be there. I ask the Minister whether the incentives to make that happen can be put in place.

We are a maritime nation. The United Kingdom's ports can be the basis for a new, low-carbon economic model and can help to address the long-standing regional imbalances that have come to characterise the British economy. This United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland should pave the way, and the devolved Administrations should not be left behind. Associated British Ports is committed to investing in green energy infrastructure, and the services needed to deliver a clean energy transition and create lasting prosperity for our coastal communities. We need greater integration between this place and the Department for the Economy back home in Northern Ireland, through the Minister's participation and encouragement. I encourage the Minister to ensure that we in Northern Ireland become part of this project.

3.24 pm

**Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I do not intend to keep hon. Members too long. In fact, I think my speech will be shorter than the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and

Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing the debate and giving me the opportunity to talk about the port of Southampton.

Associated British Ports runs the port of Southampton and is committed to decarbonisation. All ABP vehicles in the port are electric, and it has free chargers for all visitors and employees in the port. Last year, ABP commissioned its first shore power plug-in. Some 80% of cruise ships are capable of taking plug-ins, but there are very few of them in this country. In fact, ABP in Southampton had the first commercial plug-in in the UK. It would like a second one, but the national grid does not have the capacity. The new cruise terminal that it commissioned the year before last, the Horizon cruise terminal, which was opened by the then Minister for marine and maritime, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), is the greenest port terminal in the country. It has 2,000 solar panels on the roof and creates more energy than it uses every day. Elsewhere in the port, DP World operates the container facilities; it has decarbonised its vehicles and straddle cranes by using hydro-treated vegetable oil to replace diesel and has cut the terminal's emissions by some 80%.

Beyond the boundaries of the port, the Solent cluster is working to decarbonise energy. The cluster is the only decarbonisation option in the south of England. It is led by ExxonMobil, ABP, the Solent local enterprise partnership and the University of Southampton, and it has over 50 partners. ExxonMobil's plans are to create hydrogen manufacturing, which will be able to supply industrial quantities of hydrogen by 2030 while capturing the carbon that the manufacturing process creates. It will be able to capture not only its own carbon, but carbon from other industries in the area.

The private sector is creating the solutions that we have asked it to create, but too often obstacles and difficulties hinder its progress. Too often, companies come to me and say that they would like to do more, but that the Government, the grid or someone is getting in the way of their progress. That is why I wanted to come today and make a few short points to the Minister. Just as there is uncertainty to do with the national grid, there is uncertainty to do with licences for storing carbon under the sea. Those uncertainties are slowing down progress. My plea to the Minister and the Government is that, where we can, we remove any obstacles, do not create any more difficulties, and give those who will create our solutions—the private sector—any support that the Government can give.

3.27 pm

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this important debate.

There is no doubt that the port sector has a leading role to play in our energy transition. I am fortunate to have in my constituency on the Humber the ports of Immingham, Grimsby, Hull and Goole, which are all owned and operated by Associated British Ports. We are, indeed, the energy estuary. ABP is committed to green energy and to meeting our net zero ambitions. The port of Immingham is the largest port by tonnage,

[*Martin Vickers*]

handling around 46 million tonnes of cargo each year. It represents a gateway to global trade and is a critical part of the supply chain for sustainable electricity generation and other production that helps to power the nation.

Linked to ports are, of course, freeports, which also have a huge role to play in the energy transition. We are fortunate in the region to have the Humber freeport, which is determined to accelerate the region as a world-leading hub for renewable energy and clean growth. The Humber freeport incorporates three tech sites that will allow for the rapid development of new offshore wind manufacturing, which will make the site a leading UK producer of wind turbines. Given that the port of Grimsby, part of which is in my constituency, is the largest hub for offshore wind operations in the world—there is significant growth still to come—the Humber is ideally located to take advantage of the growing demand for wind energy in the North sea. The Humber ports are home to world-leading facilities such as Ørsted, the Siemens blade factory and the offshore renewable energy catapult operations maintenance bases in Grimsby. This is opportune, given that offshore wind is set to grow at pace over the next decade, with 40 GW of clean electricity planned by 2030. The Humber can act as a model not only for the UK, but for Europe and the wider world.

ABP has also partnered with Harbour Energy to develop a carbon dioxide import terminal in Immingham. That terminal will provide a large-scale facility to connect CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from industrial businesses around the UK to Viking CCS's CO<sub>2</sub> storage sites in the southern North sea. The project includes Phillips 66, VPI and West Burton Energy. Together, they aim to capture 10 million tonnes of UK emissions per annum by 2030. That is vital work in the UK region that has the greatest CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by a considerable margin. Fortunately, local industry agrees that that record is not acceptable and must change, which presents a monumental opportunity. My constituency will hopefully become home to the Immingham green energy terminal, which will be on the eastern side of the port of Immingham. That is to be constructed and maintained by ABP, and will be home to Air Products' new hydrogen production facility.

The terminal will include a new jetty with up to two berths and associated infrastructure, to be used for the import and export of bulk liquids. It represents a nationally significant infrastructure project and therefore requires a development consent order from the Secretary of State. I hope that the Minister will feed back positively on this project to his Department, given that the terminal will contribute to the Humber 2030 vision; the Humber Energy Board is driving forward change in local industries in order to decarbonise the Humber and deliver clean energy for the future.

The Minister will be aware of the CATCH training facility based at Stallingborough on the south bank of the Humber, which is being developed as a national net zero training centre. The significance of recent and planned investment in decarbonisation projects in the Humber cannot be overestimated. Offshore wind, hydrogen energy, carbon capture—the Humber ports have it all. We are proud to be the UK's energy estuary, and I am determined for us to maximise the opportunities that arise from the net zero transition, creating highly skilled

jobs and driving investment. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire said, we are in a worldwide field. We need certainty and speedy decisions from the Department; I am sure that the Minister will confirm that that is what we will get.

3.32 pm

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this debate. He is right to highlight the opportunities in the Celtic sea. I shall briefly provide some geographical balance and complete our tour of coastal Britain by showcasing the work that is taking place in the southern North sea, off the East Anglia coast. With the right investment in ports such as Lowestoft, so much more could be achieved that would not only enhance our energy security and propel us down the road to net zero, but help to deliver long-term economic growth.

Lowestoft port, which is likewise part of the ABP fleet, has a good story to tell. SSE has run its operations and maintenance base in the outer harbour since 2012, and ScottishPower Renewables has done likewise since 2019. ABP is progressing plans for the Lowestoft eastern energy facility. There will also be a direct air carbon capture demonstrator site in the inner harbour, which is being progressed by ABP in conjunction with Sizewell C. Lowestoft and Ipswich ports will also play important roles in delivering materials to the Sizewell C nuclear power station.

A good start has been made, but there are challenges immediately ahead that need to be addressed if we are to make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. There is a global race for green investment. The UK should not and cannot get into a subsidy race to the bottom with the likes of the United States. Instead, we should work faster and smarter, building flexibly on what we have already achieved.

In his April report, UK offshore wind champion Tim Pick highlighted a variety of risks that have limited UK port investment. Some of those relate to the contracts for difference mechanism. I will not go into those in detail, as many of us will be back here tomorrow to take part in the debate on the subject led by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The report highlighted a variety of obstacles that need to be addressed. There are some interesting recommendations, which I will briefly highlight: an industrial growth plan; a support framework for offshore wind ports targeted at the risks that they face; and a recommendation that the Government should give offshore wind ports priority, just as they do to offshore wind farms, in the national policy statements. I would be most grateful if, in summing up, my right hon. Friend the Minister advised us how he and the Government will respond to Tim Pick's report, with specific regard to promoting investment in port infrastructure.

In conclusion, over the past decade offshore wind has been a great British success story. We put in place a mechanism that has worked very well. However, due to geopolitical and inflationary pressures, it needs recalibrating. As part of that process, leading up to the autumn statement, we need to review the way we promote investment in port infrastructure. Ports such as Lowestoft are honeypots not only for decarbonisation but for job

creation and regeneration. They are the link between offshore electricity regeneration and onshore supply chains. Nurture them properly and the dividends will be significant.

3.36 pm

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I am delighted to sum up in today's debate on the contribution of ports to green energy. I really do thank the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) for securing this debate, which it is important to have at this time.

This debate gives me the chance to highlight some of the benefits, from a Scottish perspective, of the development of ports north of the border, where our green port ethos is centred on the importance of net zero and the just transition. At the heart of the Scottish Government's unique approach to our green ports is the commitment to the development of renewable technology, an innovative environment and the promotion of decarbonisation, alongside the creation of well-paid, high-quality jobs and skills development.

In that sense, the fair work practices agenda is embedded in our green ports from the get-go, and progress on freeports and green ports must be monitored and evaluated to ensure a just transition. We want to ensure that we make the most of the skillset we have in Scotland, valuing the existing expertise across the energy sectors while transitioning from oil and gas to renewables, and training up the new generation of workers into high-quality work.

In developing the Scottish green port model, the Scottish Government were mindful of the more negative aspects of freeports and their reputation for poor working practices, deregulation, weak productivity and the lack of real benefits for their surrounding areas. Instead, in Scotland, we are centring on sustainability, environmental concerns and fairness to boost innovation in renewables, and focusing on a prosperous growth agenda for our local communities based around our ports.

**Douglas Ross:** Given everything positive that the hon. Member has said about freeports in Scotland, does he agree that it is disappointing that the Scottish Greens, who are in government with his party in Holyrood, do not support Scotland's two freeports?

**Douglas Chapman:** I worked very closely with the Minister, Ivan McKee, when the green ports project was at its inception. We worked with the UK Government at that time as well, and Mr McKee was very supportive of the whole concept. There is more I want to say today that might give the hon. Member a bit more reassurance that we see the green port opportunity as just that: a real opportunity to develop the economy of Scotland.

Others have mentioned their own constituencies; I am the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife, which has one of the two green ports being developed in Scotland, at Rosyth on the firth of Forth, along with Leith and Grangemouth. I believe it will be transformative for the local economy and in trying to meet our environmental ambitions. The green port will feature a new freight terminal, offshore renewable manufacturing and green power generation capacity, skills development opportunities

and new rail connections. The regeneration of this important logistical port should deliver a huge boost to the local community, through employment opportunities, and the wider economy in the surrounding area. It is good for energy security, good for creating prosperous communities and, importantly, good for the environment.

The Forth green port aims to bring £6 billion in private and public investment and will contribute £4 billion in gross value added. It has the potential to create 50,000 high-quality jobs, stimulate growth in renewable manufacturing, and develop offshore wind and various alternative fuel sectors. It will also support research and development investment and drive business growth for small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups.

Alongside the development of the green port, I have been campaigning for a number of years to reinstate the ferry connection from Rosyth to mainland Europe, which will not only boost connectivity and trade prospects, but contribute to a reduction in harmful emissions by reducing both the tourism carbon footprint and road miles for freight transport. It would also reduce the pressure on the land bridge ports in the south-east of England. It is a good example of joined-up thinking for the climate and for the economy. I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will open their ears to this plea. The project currently has a logjam with the border and export authorities in London. If anything could be done to ease that pain, we could get ahead and ensure that the ferry service can start as soon as possible. In the Republic of Ireland, I have seen new ferry routes helping to boost exports. If Ireland can do it, why not Scotland?

The second green port will be based at the Inverness and Cromarty firth—another area steeped in industrial history and now playing a critical role in offshore wind. The project will place the highlands at the heart of the drive towards net zero. It will create 15,000 jobs in the area and a further 10,000 across Scotland and the rest of the UK, focusing on renewable and low-carbon energy production. Again, it is good for the economy, good for creating prosperous communities, and good for the environment.

Before I draw to a close, it is good to remind colleagues not just of the benefits of a just transition, but of its true definition. Scotland's Just Transition Commission described it as a process whereby

“Governments design policies in a way that”

benefits the climate change agenda—benefits that are widely shared—but where

“the costs do not unfairly burden those least able to pay, or whose livelihoods are directly or indirectly at risk as the economy shifts and changes.”

I remind Opposition politicians that we are trying to lead on that in Scotland, but we need to focus on these ambitious climate and net zero targets to ensure that the just transition actually happens and remains meaningful.

In conclusion, the Scottish Government are committed to using the new green ports to attract investment into our economy. In addition, Scotland has all the potential to be a world-leading green energy producer, where the jobs, the revenue and the power rest with Scotland. The maritime sector also has a strong responsibility and an opportunity to be a key player in that ambition and to make the managed transition work for everyone. Between our industry sectors and Government, we can all benefit, but the message needs to be: let's just do it.

3.43 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing the debate and on a very good speech; I agree with most of what he said. It was also good to hear about the consensus and the joint work on the Celtic freeport from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnoch), and about his ambition for Port Talbot to be at the forefront of the floating offshore wind industry.

I also enjoyed listening to the hon. Members for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), for Waveney (Peter Aldous), for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Moray (Douglas Ross), and it is always good to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about his commitment to net zero. It is clear that there has been a lot of consensus in the Chamber today. That demonstrates the strong consensus across the House about the importance of the green energy transition, and the good jobs and prosperity that it needs to create—and will create—up and down the country, particularly for port communities and other places with a strong industrial heritage, some of which have suffered economically in recent years, as the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire pointed out.

Ports have a key role to play in helping to decarbonise energy generation, transport and industry. Their role as bases for the offshore wind industry and the skilled workforce that many of them have make them pivotal to the UK's energy transition. Many ports are already playing that role with offshore wind and many more could unlock further power generation from floating offshore wind and—potentially—hydrogen.

Floating offshore wind is an exciting, pioneering technology, which allows us to tap into wind power further out at sea where the winds are stronger and more consistent, but the water is too deep for regular offshore wind facilities. We need to do everything we can to maximise the benefits of this industry. As it stands, there are no port facilities in the country that are fit for the mass deployment of floating offshore wind. Ports need investment and upgrading to be able to manufacture and assemble the components of those turbines and their bases at the required size, which I believe is up to 150 metres. These are huge pieces of kit that we need to be able to manufacture and assemble in the UK.

Crucially for ports, we also need new wind projects—both standard offshore and floating—to come forward for investment. That is another reason why the Government's completely avoidable failure on offshore wind in the recent contracts for difference round was so disappointing, with no offshore wind or floating offshore bids. No new offshore wind projects means £2 billion more on families' energy bills and means our energy security will be weakened.

Ministers were repeatedly warned about the impacts of higher inflation and setting an unrealistic strike price, but they did not act. Because of that missed opportunity, we will now be more dependent on expensive and polluting fossil fuels. Every wind farm that we fail to build leaves us more exposed to the whims of petrostates and dictators such as Putin. The Government are

squandering our potential for offshore wind power, just as they squandered our potential for onshore wind by effectively banning it for so long. All this has resulted in higher bills, energy insecurity, fewer jobs and climate failure. Britain's port communities and the rest of Britain deserve better.

That is why the next Labour Government will drive forward offshore and floating wind through major investments to our ports, providing £1.8 billion over five years to ensure that we can construct, manufacture, deploy and maintain offshore wind and marine renewables from UK harbours. This would be the biggest investment in our ports for decades, benefiting communities in Wales, Scotland and across the UK.

We will establish a national wealth fund. This will be a new strategic body to ensure that when public money is spent on building British businesses, the British people will benefit from the long-term return that those investments produce. That will ensure that the whole country benefits from the wealth and talent that are created in our nation, so that with every investment, jobs and economic benefits flow into our communities and the British people benefit from the return on those investments.

A Labour Government will invest to drive forward projects that are necessary to the energy transition and our industrial future, crowding in further private investment in crucial infrastructure. GB Energy will be able to de-risk new energy technologies, helping to speed up and scale up development in areas such as green hydrogen and floating offshore wind. With a target to achieve clean power by 2030, and making, buying and selling more in Britain, GB Energy will overturn the stagnation and offshoring of British jobs and manufacturing that have been caused by the neglect of the British wind power industry.

Industry is calling out for more support and more certainty so that it can make the long-term decisions to develop infrastructure and ensure that we have the critical capacity necessary to deliver our ambition for clean power. Industry will get that with Labour. The current Government are progressing FLOWMIS—the floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme—with up to £160 million of grant funding for port infrastructure, which is small change really, in relation to manufacturing facilities, and which will be inadequate without serious strategic investment in our nation's ports, so that they are big enough and advanced enough for the most cutting-edge technologies. Compare that with Labour's £1.8 billion commitment. Like others here, we want to see the money reaching ports, where it can make the most difference to jobs and power generation.

Will the Minister confirm when the awards will be made? Will it be enough to reach 5 GW of capacity by 2030? Owing to the Government's handling of contracts for difference, we are understandably sceptical. On that point, will he outline his plans to recover the progress that we need to make on offshore wind, following the massive setback of CfD 5? Expanding offshore and delivering strategic port upgrades will be crucial for a renaissance of green jobs and opportunity in those communities. We want those port communities to be successful. Labour is committed to delivering that. I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

3.49 pm

**The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I begin by thanking and congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb) on securing this important debate. We have heard high-class contributions from pretty much every person who has spoken so far. I will return, if I have time, to the trite and empty remarks—which were perhaps written by others—from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith).

Just by way of context, it is worth highlighting the record, because track records should count for something. Less than 7% of our electricity came from renewables in 2010. That was the dire inheritance of this Government. It was the CfDs developed and delivered by this Government that transformed the economics of offshore wind and which led us from the Labour record of less than 7% to nearly half in the first quarter of this year. We have gone from a desperate legacy, where nearly 40% of our electricity came from coal—the filthiest of fossil fuels—as recently as 2012 to that being eliminated next year under this Conservative Government. It is this Conservative Government who have led the world. We have cut emissions more than any other major economy on earth and grown our economy significantly at the same time.

We heard about crowding in private investment, Great British Energy and writing cheques, which is the last thing we need. We have heard that from Labour before, yet every Labour Government in history have ended with unemployment higher than it was at the beginning, when they started. They all offer hope and cheques for all, promises of huge support and endless taxpayer subsidy, which will deliver nirvana. Nirvana has never been delivered by Labour—not a green one and not any other kind. I said that bit would come at the end, but I had to indulge myself and do it at the beginning.

As has been said by everyone here today, ports are so important to unlocking the green revolution. As colleague after colleague have highlighted, from the Humber to Wales to Scotland, the southern North sea and Northern Ireland, ports have an enormous contribution to make to economic regeneration. The fact that we are blessed with this phenomenal renewable energy opportunity in the UK—which this Government, uniquely and unlike the previous, are committed to unlocking—means that we can turn levelling up from an excellent concept into genuine delivery. The previously highly carbon-dependent areas of this country are the very areas that genuinely need that, and they are best set to benefit from it. Their ports are what will make that possible.

I recognise the importance of existing port activity in south Wales in securing the UK's and indeed Europe's energy supply. Last year, rather than being, as in the previous year, a net importer of a billion cubic metres of gas, we moved to being an exporter of 19 billion cubic metres of gas, making a significant contribution to storage in Europe and the energy security of an entire continent. A lot of that came through south Wales. Of course, it is the two LNG terminals in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire, on the Milford Haven waterway, that helped to deliver that. Looking forward, the success of the Celtic freeport bid, covering Milford Haven and

Port Talbot, demonstrates the opportunity to unlock investment and therefore growth for the south Wales area and delivering those high-paid, long-term jobs that so many colleagues on the Government side of the House not only talked about, but have a history of delivering.

The right port infrastructure is vital to deliver offshore wind and other renewables, as part of our transition to net zero. Big though the energy business, carbon capture and related things are, perhaps the biggest opportunity here is what all this will facilitate. When we took on the COP presidency, just 30% of global GDP had made net zero pledges. By the time the presidency was handed on by the UK to Egypt, that figure stood at more than 90%. The world is following. If we create among the world's first genuine net zero industrial clusters, the inward investment that will come—into non-directly energy-related, yet still energy-dependent businesses, as every business is—could be quite phenomenal. That is why colleagues are right to share their excitement and why my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire is right, again and again—alongside, as always, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—to come here and enthuse about the importance of this and the opportunity it brings.

The Government's policies, as set out in the British energy security strategy and endorsed in “Powering Up Britain” earlier this year, include bold new commitments, so that we can supercharge clean energy and accelerate renewable energy deployment. The Government set an ambition of 50 GW of offshore wind by 2030, up from just 14 GW today. The UK has the largest offshore wind sector in Europe and is home to all four of the largest offshore wind farms in the world. As part of that ambition, we are aiming for up to 5 GW of floating offshore wind. Colleagues have rightly highlighted the importance of ports to that, given the gargantuan scale of the products that will be required. Ports will play a vital part.

Colleagues have raised the issue of ensuring that we maximise the industrial heft and capability from this sector, which is why we are looking at reviewing the contracts for difference scheme and improving it with non-financial factors and other ways of encouraging industrial development.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) asked me what work we could do with the Crown Estate. The first thing is to work super closely with it, which we do. We are backed by colleagues from His Majesty's Treasury, and it has been great to see how we can work together co-operatively to unlock this. As part of the tender for the offshore wind leasing round 5 in the Celtic sea, the Crown Estate will require floating wind developers to set out specific commitments to ports, as well as binding commitments on wider issues such as enhancing skills, addressing environmental impacts and delivering community benefits. I hope that that answers the hon. Gentleman's reasonable question.

**Douglas Chapman:** During my summing up, I mentioned the ferry terminal from Rosyth to Europe. The Minister has brought in other issues such as skills, training and so on, but the other thing that we should think about is our ports for exports and ferry services. I noticed that he made a note that he would contact his colleagues at

[Douglas Chapman]

border control—that is a complete roadblock at the moment—to make sure that the ferry service can go ahead and be a success.

**Graham Stuart:** I certainly sympathise with the Scottish Government's troubles and challenges with ferries. As the hon. Gentleman suggests, through my officials I will pass on that message to other Departments to facilitate that. Anything we can do to help, we will seek to do.

**Douglas Chapman:** Will the Minister give way?

**Graham Stuart:** I will not.

The offshore renewable energy catapult has estimated that floating offshore wind could deliver more than £40 billion for our economy by 2050, creating about 30,000 jobs in the process. We are moving at pace to deliver those benefits, with more than 25 GW of floating wind projects with confirmed seabed exclusivity—the most in the world. The last thing we need to introduce into the excellent track record and system for bringing in private sector investment from all over the world—which we are proud of—is Labour's plans for Great British Energy clunking into a carefully calibrated set of market mechanisms. That will have exactly the opposite effect of the objectives that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington, set out.

Going further, the Crown Estate has announced its plans to hold a seabed leasing round in the Celtic sea, capable of supporting up to a further 4.5 GW, as we have heard. We also understand the importance to investors of certainty on a long-term leasing pipeline. If they can see the scale, we can get large-scale investment. We are acutely aware of that issue and are working closely with the Crown Estate and with other Government Departments. We must ensure that the multiple uses of our seas are thoroughly considered, so that we can then provide the visibility to unlock investments in ports, which will then unlock further investment.

The Government recognise the critical role that ports will play in achieving our green energy ambitions and the importance of securing investment in the infrastructure. They will also be a big enabler for offshore wind and a catalyst for wider supply chain development.

**Stephen Kinnock** *rose*—

**Graham Stuart:** I think I am about to be cut off. Are we finishing at 4 pm?

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** No, we have until 4.15 pm.

**Graham Stuart:** Then I would be delighted to give way.

**Stephen Kinnock:** I am sure that the Minister is absolutely delighted that the voting interruption has given us some additional time. He was talking about floating offshore wind infrastructure. I do not know if he is coming to this, but I asked about grid capacity. There are real concerns that there will not be the grid capacity to facilitate all this, which is having an impact on developers' thinking, too. What comments does he have on that?

**Graham Stuart:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for another excellent and well-made point. One of the biggest challenges facing my Department is ensuring that we have the facilitating infrastructure. No matter how interesting the generation is—nuclear, floating, fixed-bed, onshore, offshore—it does not really matter if the electrons cannot get where they need to. That is why we commissioned the Winsor review on transmission, and I am really grateful to him for his work. We are going to be reporting back on that as soon as we can. We are working closely with National Grid and others to speed up the extraordinarily long times it takes to put that infrastructure in place. The hon. Member for Aberavon was right to say that if we want to realise our Celtic sea ambitions or our other ambitions around the UK, we need the facilitating infrastructure.

More locally, we are also focused on connections. We will shortly be coming out with a connections plan, because we have queues filled with projects that may never go ahead. We need to find ways to deal with that legally and properly. We now have a dedicated Minister for Nuclear and Networks, precisely because we recognise the challenge. The hon. Member for Aberavon is right to highlight that. We are working flat out on it and it is probably our top priority.

**Stephen Crabb:** On the important issue that the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) raised about the grid, is the Minister aware of any specific work by National Grid looking at the grid needs of ports, so that we know which UK ports are going to be energy ports? We can predict where those locations are going to be and we can see activity already happening. Is National Grid doing a piece of work to map the grid requirements of the next 20 to 30 years and put together plans for individual port locations?

**Graham Stuart:** One recommendation of the Winsor report was that we pull together a much more coherent overall spatial plan. In previous years, things were done on a fairly linear basis, as we have seen in East Anglia. We have been taking steps through the holistic network design—not necessarily the best title—in phases simply to ensure that we have a more strategic and joined-up approach. We cannot do it project by project; we have to plan the whole thing out. We want to take it from a regional basis to a national basis. Further information will be set out by the Government.

We are working with our European neighbours. I spoke to the German ambassador only this morning about the fact that all of us around the North sea need to think and work together on a common basis. If we do so, we will be better able to realise the huge opportunities in the surrounding seas, do so at the lowest possible cost and maximise European energy security and the jobs and benefits that spring from doing that work.

For floating offshore wind specifically, the industry road map 2040, developed by the floating offshore wind taskforce, identified the need for up to 11 ports across the UK to support the roll-out of commercial-scale floating offshore wind. That is a significant opportunity for the years to come. To support the industry, the Government launched the £160 million floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme, which the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington, asked about in one of the much more reasonable comments



in his speech. We are doing everything we can to bring the timing of that forward and do the assessment, and I hope that we will be able to announce the next stage—due diligence—before the end of this year, but that is tight.

In the coming years, the UK and other countries will exponentially increase their offshore wind deployment in the North sea, the Celtic sea and across a range of new markets. We signed a memorandum of understanding with countries surrounding the North sea in the week before Christmas last year about our rejoining the North Seas Energy Co-operation forum, and we will be having another ministerial next month to ensure that we are working closely together.

We will work with industry, through RenewableUK and the Offshore Wind Industry Council, to assess supply chain needs, which so many colleagues have rightly raised, and to identify the opportunities for the UK to lead and benefit from sustainable growth in the industry, including through building new export opportunities. As a former exports Minister, I recognise that by leaning in ahead as we have done—we have cut our emissions more than any other country on earth—and developing the technologies and solutions, we then have the long-term opportunity to export it. If we can capture more than enough of that energy to meet our own needs, we can export it directly. We could also convert it into green hydrogen, and we can export that. We can also bring in the carbon that will still necessarily be emitted by certain industries and our western European neighbours and put that into the 78 gigatonnes of capacity we have in the North sea. There is so much to be done here, and it can make such a difference: it can bring about the renaissance of industry in the north-east and north-west of England, in Scotland, in Wales and in Northern Ireland, as well as all around the country. It is a very exciting thing.

As I said, ports are not just important for offshore wind. They will also play a key role for carbon capture and storage, supporting the decarbonisation of emitters. Maritime shipping will play a key role, linking emissions captured from the dispersed sites with offshore CO<sub>2</sub> storage sites. Import and export ports across the UK that can handle large volumes of CO<sub>2</sub> will be required to facilitate the transport and storage of CO<sub>2</sub> via ships. We heard about the plans for the Humber and elsewhere, indeed including on the south coast as mentioned in the brilliant, albeit short, speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith).

On hydrogen, the Government recognise that port infrastructure will have a big role to play. We have a target of 10 GW of low-carbon production by 2030. As the hydrogen economy matures and the UK exploits export opportunities, we will need the right port infrastructure to accommodate large transport ships bringing in or taking away hydrogen, and we are determined to seize those opportunities for the UK economy. It is so important that we do not have an Administration who would do the exact opposite—and who have a track record of that.

**Peter Aldous:** Offshore wind champion Tim Pick has highlighted some of the obstacles that need to be overcome for the industry to realise its full potential. Some of that focuses on ports. Will the Minister provide a bit more detail on the Government's response to his proposals and recommendations?

**Graham Stuart:** We are working with industry through the Offshore Wind Industry Council, of which I am a co-chair, to consider Tim Pick's wide-ranging recommendations, including developing an industry growth plan. Again, this is to do with supporting the development of the UK supply chain and, as we do this massive deployment, trying to ensure that as much as possible of the industrial heft of that can be delivered through the UK and UK jobs. That work is ongoing, and we will keep going.

The hon. Member for Strangford will be aware that Northern Ireland has a target for 1 GW of offshore wind from 2030. SBM Offshore and Simply Blue are developing FLOW projects in Northern Ireland. Likewise, Simply Blue is developing the Erebus project in the Celtic sea.

I was asked about meetings. Notwithstanding any transport and logistical challenges, I would be delighted to come to Wales. I must pay tribute once again to my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire, who is relentless, albeit always cheerful and well-considered, in promoting the need for understanding and engagement with his part of the world and the opportunities that offers for the whole of the UK in contributing to the global challenge on climate change and, most importantly, in delivering a more prosperous and better future for constituents in his part of the world. Thank you, Mrs Cummins, for chairing the debate.

4.8 pm

**Stephen Crabb:** Thank you, Mrs Cummins, for your excellent chairing. I thank all colleagues who participated in what I thought was a useful, practical and good-natured debate. I always come away from these things having learned quite a lot about what is going on in different parts of the country. Really exciting things linked to renewable energy are happening in so many different port communities around the UK. We hope that that continues to go from strength to strength.

I really appreciated the winding-up remarks of the Minister, who always speaks with intelligence and passion. He really believes in what he talks about, and I know that he is engaged with industry, the Crown Estate and other stakeholders to try to make this vision a reality. I look forward to welcoming him to the port of Milford Haven in a matter of weeks, whenever we can get it arranged. That would be hugely welcome.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the contribution of ports to green energy.

## **Business Banking: Undesignated Client Accounts**

4.11 pm

**Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins, on an issue that is affecting many businesses across a number of sectors. It is an issue that is extremely important to the businesses that are affected, and one that could have a significant impact on many businesses and their customers in future. I want to raise the situation faced by a number of small businesses with ongoing struggles to get access to the bank accounts that they need to carry out day-to-day functions and protect their clients' customer funds.

Over the past couple of years, I have heard horror stories from a number of reputable and long-established companies that have been driven to the brink of closure as a result of how anti-money laundering regulations, particularly the Joint Money Laundering Steering Group guidelines, are being understood and implemented by UK banks. Many small businesses that deal with large quantities of client money use pooled client accounts, also known as undesignated client accounts.

I have a background in the marine industry, so I have a good understanding of, knowledge of and relationship with the industry. That is why, when the Association of Brokers and Yacht Agents reached out to me to highlight its concerns, I understood that it was a real issue and that I needed to work with the association, along with the Treasury and other relevant parties such as UK Finance and the Financial Conduct Authority, to try to resolve it. Yacht brokers are a very resilient bunch and are a key part of the UK's marine industry, so when I hear that they are facing challenges that threaten their businesses, it is something of great concern that we must take seriously.

Although I initially raised this issue on behalf of the yacht broking industry, I have since learned that it is an issue that affects a number of other industries and sectors, including letting agents, estate agents, jewellers, care homes and even solicitors. I suspect it affects many more. I have had recent engagement with Propertymark, the professional body for property agents, which represents over 12,500 member branches in the UK, some of whom are being affected in the same way.

I will briefly explain why the yacht broking industry has come to use those types of accounts, and where we are up to with getting this resolved. In the early 2000s, the yacht broking industry faced a severe crisis when yacht broker and new boat dealer BA Peters went into liquidation. This created shockwaves throughout the industry, as BA Peters did not have a pooled client account in place. As a result, clients' money was not protected when the company collapsed. Numerous individuals lost their deposits and the proceeds of sales, with some receiving only 23p for every £1 they were owed. It also resulted in a massive bill for the Insolvency Service to conduct a thorough investigation to try to identify client funds and into which of the many accounts they had been paid. This devastating experience exposed the vulnerability of client funds and the need for urgent safeguards.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on bringing forward this debate. We spoke beforehand. Does she agree that some banks are

being accused of using the legislation she referred to as a way of closing accounts that are not profitable? I have several examples from back home in Strangford—I could read out two pages of them—of businesses being given no other reason for closure than this legislation. Does the right hon. Lady agree that the loophole must be closed?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. Something is going on, and it is worrying. Banks are there to help us with our personal finances, but they are also a key part of how all businesses operate within the UK. I would be very disappointed if they were taking a cynical approach to potentially reduce costs of applications. However, having heard that some organisations are now being requested to implement a number of individual accounts, maybe there is a business case for them to want to administer 1,000 bank charges rather than just one.

In the aftermath of this, the yacht broking industry came together to ensure that such a calamity could never occur again. It was unanimously agreed that all yacht brokers should establish pooled client accounts as a standard practice. The PCAs were designed to protect client funds and enhance transparency in financial transactions. That became industry standard practice and is a prerequisite for any business joining an association such as ABYA. It is now a requirement by many professional indemnity insurance providers to hold client funds in these accounts. To formalise those efforts, brokers that set up PCAs with banks obtained letters confirming that funds held in those accounts were exclusively client funds and not part of the broker's trading capital. Thus, they could not be used to offset business loans or overdrafts with that bank. That strengthened the protection of clients' interests and returned confidence to the marine sector.

In 2009, it was made compulsory for anyone acting as an introducer for marine finance or settling marine finance to be registered with the Office of Fair Trading. That was a significant step towards regulating the industry and ensuring that financial transactions adhered to established standards.

In 2015, the Financial Conduct Authority was formed. The FCA introduced the FCA Handbook, taking over regulatory oversight. In 2016, the FCA confirmed that yacht brokers did not fall within the scope of the FCA handbook for holding PCAs, but did need to be registered for acting as an introducer for finance and insurance.

In 2020, significant changes occurred to the anti-money laundering regulations. That was when I first heard of the struggles that the industry were coming up against. Anti-money laundering legislation was introduced in 2017, as were updated Joint Money Laundering Steering Group guidelines, but notably they did not mention yacht brokers being excluded from FCA registration, or that their PCAs could be assessed using a simplified due diligence approach. That led to confusion and concern within the industry. As a result, major UK banks such as Lloyds, HSBC, Barclays and NatWest started to refuse to open PCAs for yacht brokers and threatened a number of businesses with the closure of their accounts.

Over the following months, I heard numerous stories from businesses within the industry that were fearful that, should they have their accounts closed, they would be unable to trade. Reputable businesses that had been trading for decades were suddenly faced with that terrifying

prospect. Many of those yacht brokers are small independent family-run businesses. Contrary to what often comes to mind when yachts are mentioned, they are not large businesses trading in multimillion-pound superyachts and they do not have thousands of pounds in capital behind them; they tend to be long-established reputable small businesses operating in our coastal communities, where the marine industry may be a key part of the local economy, selling smaller boats for UK leisure.

Some of those family-run businesses—registered UK companies—operate across borders to support UK clients to buy, sell or hire their boats. Many of their clients are repeat customers because of the great experience they have encountered and the reassurance and confidence that their funds are safe.

All ABYA-member brokers are required to abide by strict professional standards to minimise fraud and money laundering. Yacht brokers are required to complete “know your customer” checks to verify clients’ official documentation such as driving licences, passports and utility bills, to ensure that the documents are valid and that the person is not on the anti-money laundering or politically exposed persons lists.

Purchasers receive a legally signed sale and purchase agreement, and all transactions are done by bank transfer, so there is a full audit trail of the money. ABYA yacht brokers do not accept any form of cash payment. As I mentioned, brokers undertake their own checks and specific sale and purchase agreements for every transaction, and they rely on UK and EU banks to transmit funds to the PCA from their own bona fide and validated clients.

Despite the checks that brokers carry out and the detailed recording of transactions, the fact that UK banks now consider yacht broking to be a high-risk business might imply that UK banks are failing their customers’ AML and politically exposed person checks before opening their client accounts.

In January 2022, ABYA and I held a crucial meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who was then the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, and UK Finance. Following that meeting, he agreed to issue guidance allowing banks to simplify due diligence for opening and maintaining PCAs. That decision was made to try to temporarily ease the conflict between banks and account holders, and to encourage banks to keep accounts open while a comprehensive review of the anti-money laundering regulations was undertaken. This review was expected in December 2022 but, to the disappointment of both me and the industry, it was pushed back a year until December 2023. I am grateful to the Chief Secretary for the action and the interim guidance he provided in his previous role, but unfortunately that did not go far enough to prevent many banks from closing some of those accounts, which had a devastating impact on some of our small businesses.

In May 2020, we witnessed Barclays close the first pooled client account of a yacht broker because it was not registered with the FCA and part of its business involved cross-border transactions. Members will be unsurprised to learn that cross-border transactions are a fairly normal part of yacht sales, given the nature of boats. The stress that caused the company, including its potential collapse, and the impact on clients resulted in the director of that small UK-registered company suffering a mental illness for which, 18 months on, he is still receiving medical treatment and support.

That move set a worrying precedent. In May 2023, Barclays blocked the accounts of another company without appropriate notice, preventing the company from accessing its funds for three weeks. Not only that, but the bank transferred the funds from a European pooled client account into pounds sterling and placed the funds into the company’s account, without the authority of the clients whose funds were in the pooled client account. I understand that ABYA has asked the FCA to investigate that case, as it believes that Barclays had breached the provisions of the FCA handbook. As an aside, I have been made aware of another case in which such action by a UK bank has affected personal bank accounts, so I am concerned about how widespread that type of action is among some UK banks.

The FCA has acknowledged ABYA’s concern but has refused to conduct a full investigation and take appropriate action against Barclays, which I believe sets a dangerous precedent by endorsing Barclays’s actions and destabilising the security of PCAs for all industries. The FCA has advised ABYA that its members should report the incident to the financial ombudsman, which they have done, but they have been advised that it could take up to 18 months for it to report back.

To enable their business to continue trading, the directors of the affected company had to personally fund their clients’ sales and purchases, while Barclays sat on its client funds. That has also had a significant impact on the mental health of the directors of those businesses. Only last week, HSBC approached yacht brokers to ask them to stop using their pooled client accounts. I have recently been made aware that marine insurance companies, which have thousands of clients, are also being asked to cease using pooled client accounts.

The consequences of those developments extend beyond the yacht broking industry. They are a concerning precedent, which indicates that funds held in PCAs for clients may not be as secure as was previously believed. The situation has implications not only for the yacht industry but for lawyers, estate agents and care homes, as I have mentioned. Only last week, Propertymark members reported that Lloyds had threatened one of their members with account closure if they continued to use PCAs. That forced the property agent to open and hold individual client accounts for the rents and deposits of every landlord they worked for, and this particular agent was working with over 100 landlords.

ABYA has been at the forefront of the efforts to address the issue. It has tried to push various individuals who have influence over the matter to work together and with the industry to find short and long-term solutions. The Treasury has met and been in communication with ABYA’s chairman, Peter Norris, and has agreed to meet him again. For that, I am grateful. I am also grateful for the continued engagement I have received from the Treasury and its Ministers over the last 18 months. ABYA has worked to strengthen its code of practice and engage with banks consistently over the past couple of years. ABYA has candidly and consistently said that it will put in place whatever measures and changes to its code of conduct are necessary to ensure that banks have confidence to offer these services to ABYA members.

Since the FCA’s confirmation that yacht brokers do not need to register to hold PCAs, one bank has asked its customers to register as a high-value dealer with His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs for anti-money laundering purposes. ABYA is currently in consultation with HMRC

[Kelly Tolhurst]

to see whether it is possible to register as a high-value dealer, as such registrations normally apply only to businesses that deal in cash transactions of over £10,000 or €10,000. I understand that HMRC is questioning whether that is a necessary registration.

It has been a particularly tiring and frustrating few years for the industry, and ABYA and other industry representatives can only do so much. They have shown their willingness to find solutions, but we need the same willingness and drive to find a solution. As I have mentioned, these are often long-established small businesses or sole traders. Like any businesses, these companies are lifelines for their owners, employees and local economies, and they rarely have significant capital reserves to keep them afloat while seeking a resolution with the banks. It has been heartbreaking to hear the panic and distress that some of the businesses have been put through. Some business owners have been driven to the point of illness or, in some cases, have wanted to take their own life because of the stress of the potential loss of their business. As someone who ran a business prior to becoming an MP, I can totally empathise and understand how those business owners may be feeling.

Can the Minister confirm that there will be no more delay in bringing forward the consultation on the review of the anti-money laundering regulations? Can the Minister also assure me and those listening that he and the Treasury are engaging with the banking sector to represent the views of these small businesses, which are struggling to survive as a result of the actions that have been taken? Will he commit to urgently finding a short-term solution for this very real issue, which is having a devastating impact on people's businesses and livelihoods?

4.29 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) for highlighting this important issue. She has been tenacious, and I convey my distress at the frustration suffered. The industry is an historic one and is important to us. She and I have worked together in the past to support the small and medium-sized enterprises of this great nation, but not until today had I realised the importance of the yacht broking industry. I also know about her passion for sailing, which is reflected in her role as patron of the Medway and Swale Boating Association. I am sure that all her members are metaphorically, and probably physically, cheering her on today. I reassure her that I share her concern about the issue.

Earlier this year the Treasury requested that the FCA lead a review into the wider matter of de-banking, to ensure that the sector was not overreaching itself through the unfair denial of banking services—in one case, based on a customer's political beliefs. That is not the matter before us, but it highlights my concern, and the

action that I took then is replicated when we find other instances in the financial sector. A bank account, as we know, is a vital part of the way in which we operate in society.

We try to get the balance right with a commitment, which I know my right hon. Friend understands, to tackling illicit finance. It is important that we get that balance right and do not put a disproportionate burden on legitimate businesses and customers. Indeed, the world of financial regulation is fraught with well-intentioned regulations that nevertheless have deleterious unintended consequences. This is an example. Pooled client accounts have many virtues. They protect customers so that when a firm fails, their deposits and moneys are segregated. They are a vital part of how we protect consumers. It is a concern that we see banks perhaps having a misperception about the risk of those accounts and the regulation.

It is wrong—I am happy to share this with my right hon. Friend—to say that pooled client accounts are not eligible for simplified due diligence. Last year, my predecessor wrote to the chair of UK Finance, the relevant industry body, to reiterate the importance of that when it came to looking at the Joint Money Laundering Steering Group, the industry group that deals with that. My predecessor convened a roundtable with banks and the Association of Brokers and Yacht Agents to help to develop and improve mutual understanding and iron out the issues.

Banks can apply simplified due diligence to pooled client accounts where they assess the risk of money laundering and terrorist finance to be low. My right hon. Friend gave us some really good examples of that. I am not sure that there are many Russian oligarchs sailing up and down; delightful though Medway and Swale Boating Association is, I am not sure it is the destination of choice for illicit ill-gotten gains. We will, at my right hon. Friend's urging, continue to work to improve the guidance notes and work with the industry to make sure we can achieve the objectives that she talks about.

I am also happy to give my right hon. Friend the assurance that she seeks. She has been very patient and tolerant. I understand her and her constituents' frustrations, but there will be no further delays. After having consulted earlier this year, we intend to look at how we can improve and reform the anti-money laundering procedures.<sup>1</sup> As I say, we are dealing here with the law of unintended consequences. I believe that we can reconcile both objectives through better guidance and greater clarity and, where necessary, adjusting the regulations.

My message to those banks and financial intermediaries is that they should continue to engage. I know that they also do so with my noble Friend Baroness Penn. I hope that by so doing, and with that collaborative approach, we will “chart a route”—someone has been getting creative—to an effective resolution that steers us into calmer waters and that, once we are through this, it will be plain sailing.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Hate Crime Against the LGBT+ Community

4.36 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of hate crime against the LGBT+ community.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Cummins. I sincerely thank all colleagues present for attending today's debate. I draw attention to my membership of the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT+ rights, my role as co-chair of the LGBT+ parliamentary Labour party and, sadly, my own experience as a victim of LGBT+ hate crime.

I begin by thanking Stonewall, Galop and many other national organisations that speak up on these issues. Locally, in my constituency, I think of groups such as Pride Cymru and Glitter Cymru. I also want to mention the LGBT+ Safe Spaces venues, from our clubs and pubs to inclusive religious venues, and places such as the Queer Emporium in Cardiff, not to mention their brave security staff and managers, for all they do to keep our communities safe and welcome.

The fact is that, despite all the legal progress we have made in this country and the rapidly changing and welcome debate, particularly among younger generations, this is a perilous and profoundly uncertain time for the LGBT+ community in the UK. I would never seek to downplay the even worse threats of death and violence, let alone the absence of basic legal rights in many other contexts globally, but I can genuinely say that we are not in a good place here and things are getting worse.

That view is not just anecdotal. It is borne out by clear evidence and trends that I will come on to, and is sadly borne out by the stark, horrific reality that we saw in the homophobic murder of kind, compassionate Dr Gary Jenkins in my city of Cardiff in 2021. We can all think back to the horrors of the Admiral Duncan bombing in 1999 and the Stephen Port murders in 2014 to 2015 in east London, and all the failures around how that case was handled.

We are all aware of ongoing and more recent incidents, but I am conscious of the House sub judice rule and I will, therefore, refrain from commenting on a number of them. I know that colleagues will want to take particular care on that matter.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. Unfortunately, I cannot stay for the debate; I have already informed the hon. Gentleman that I have a prior appointment. As someone interested in human rights issues, I want to put on the record my condemnation of those who carry out hate crimes against anybody, wherever that happens. I fully support what the hon. Gentleman is putting forward, which I want to put on the record.

**Stephen Doughty**: I thank the hon. Member for his support, which is genuinely welcome. The cross-party group that we have here today reflects the wide concern across the House at recently released statistics.

I will refer to my own experiences, which are sadly all too common for others. I have been assaulted with a homophobic element in my own constituency in broad daylight. I have been told online by somebody that he would sort me and my issues out while I was at football, while posting pictures of me dressed up at Pride. I have been called a "faggot" while walking along Queen Street in Cardiff. Like many other members of the community, I have worried whether it is safe to kiss my boyfriend or hold his hand on the bus or the tube. Even as a parliamentarian on an overseas trip, I was told to my face that people like me are detested.

In National Hate Crime Awareness Week, rather than belittling the impact of hate crime or suggesting that it is a "woke" irrelevance, it is critical that we look into the impact that attacks are having on the community, across the country, against people who just want to love who they love, live as themselves and get on with their daily lives. In the UK in 2023, the place of LGBT+ people in society, and their safety and wellbeing—is it really such a difficult thing to ask?—simply should not be contested notions, be up for debate or, worse, lead to violence, intimidation or assault; and yet here we are.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this incredibly important debate. The figures from my local police force, North Wales police, are staggering: the number of hate crimes based on transgender identity has surged by 771%. When we bear in mind that it is likely that only one in 10 hate crimes are reported, that gives us a sense of the level of suffering and the sheer size of the problem that we have to deal with.

**Stephen Doughty**: The right hon. Member is absolutely right to highlight not only the increase, but the context of significant under-reporting. We all ought to be shocked.

This is Hate Crime Awareness Week, and the reality is that hate crime remains stubbornly high across the piece. Not least in the current context, given the despicable incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobic hate crime, we must rightly focus on religious hate crime, and race-related hate crime remains stubbornly high. That is before we consider the less looked-at but equally important disability-related examples or, of course, the widespread epidemic of violence against women and girls.

Despite a slight year-on-year fall in sexual orientation-based hate crimes, the total number of anti-LGBT+ hate crimes remains well above 2018 levels, with 28,834 recorded this year, a net increase of 217% since 2017-18.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on sharing his own personal experience. Those of us who have faced homophobic or—as I have—lesbophobic abuse know that it takes it out of us, quite frankly. How many more people have to share their stories or experience violence before we see a regression? As the hon. Gentleman has rightly said, we are talking about hate crime in the round. Does he agree that if those at the very top of Government make statements that attack some in our community, that only makes it more dangerous for everyone and justifies hate crimes against everyone?

**Stephen Doughty**: As the hon. Member knows, I totally agree with her. The scale of this issue is staggering. Those statistics in practice mean 79 incidents a day—one roughly every 20 minutes—in 2023. Of course, there is

[*Stephen Doughty*]

better police awareness and reporting in some cases, but there is significant under-reporting. Fewer than 10% of LGBT people told the national LGBT survey in 2018 that they felt comfortable reporting hate crimes to the police, so it is likely that the statistics are a drop in the ocean.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this really important debate. He has just talked about some of the statistics. Does he agree that things are even harder for LGBTQ+ black and minority ethnic people? One of the things that was flagged up with me when I attended Black Pride this year was that a number of people in that community still do not feel comfortable reporting to the police. The figures are just the tip of the iceberg.

**Stephen Doughty:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I commend Black Pride and many of the other organisations that do incredible work in this area. The intersectionality of hate crime statistics should be deeply shocking to us all.

We heard about North Wales police. My force, South Wales police, provided me with its latest statistics. Just in the period from October last year to September this year, the force recorded 645 hate crimes related to sexual orientation, resulting in 33 charges, and 170 reports of transgender-related hate crimes, resulting in five charges. I am reassured by how seriously my local force takes these issues—I have had many conversations with it—and I have heard other positive examples while preparing for the debate, from Avon and Somerset to Lancashire to Norfolk, but there are significant challenges in some places. In London, the Casey report showed that trust in the Metropolitan police has fallen faster among LGBT+ Londoners than among non-LGBT+ Londoners. Leadership and action are far too patchy across England; in the absence of a central hate crime strategy, they depend too often on individual police and crime commissioners and forces.

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. It comes at a time of a significant rise in hate crimes against the LGBTQ+ community. I stood with the trans community in Merthyr Tydfil with Merthyr Pride last week at a rally. My hon. Friend mentioned the figures supplied by his police force, which is the same as mine. Does he agree that the particularly venomous comments from the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and other senior Tories do nothing to support those figures and will increase the problem further?

**Stephen Doughty:** I greatly endorse what my hon. Friend said, and I welcome the work of Merthyr Pride. I think that was the first such event to take place in Merthyr, and the organisation does amazing work. I will come on to some of the context driving this.

We have colleagues here from across the United Kingdom. The Police Service of Northern Ireland records transphobic incidents and crimes motivated by transphobia, but unfortunately there is no enhanced sentencing for that motivation or hostility. We see a more positive picture in Wales, despite the statistics. The Welsh Labour

Government's LGBTQ+ action plan specifically covers safety, online hate, improving reporting and investing in local hate crime prevention programmes. In Scotland, there is a hate crime strategy focused on data, tackling crime online and on public transport, and supporting organisations working on these issues.

The effects of hate crime are deep and pernicious. They can unravel the lives of those who are among the most vulnerable in our society, and in the worst cases lives are lost and serious injury occurs. I pay tribute to all those who have been affected in that way, to their families and to all victims. But for many other victims of less violent offences, the crime itself is only the beginning. Some 42% of victims of hate crime felt a loss of confidence or felt vulnerable following the crime, compared with 19% for all other crimes; 29% of hate crime victims had difficulty sleeping, in comparison with 13% for all crimes; and 34% of hate crime victims suffered from anxiety or panic attacks compared with 14% for others.

**Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward this important debate. I worry that too often the focus does not come from the point of view of the individuals who may be subject to this type of violence and their voices are suppressed. Does he agree that we must remember the unique position of LGBTQ+ women in our discussions?

**Stephen Doughty:** Absolutely. I spoke earlier about intersectionality. When we look at wider violence against women and girls, or violence related to race or disability, there can be a double or triple whammy for people experiencing violence on the basis of who they are. It is simply unacceptable.

Given the shocking record and the shocking increases that we have seen in recent years, it is no wonder that many LGBT+ people—people we all represent—feel less safe and more afraid to walk down the road holding hands with their partner, to present themselves as they wish and to remain authentic, honest versions of themselves. But it does not have to be this way. We know that we are capable of providing vibrant, diverse, dynamic, beautiful and inclusive communities.

**Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I apologise that I will not be able to stay until the end. We have heard from others how the current climate has been fostered by the very unprofessional and negative comments from some Cabinet members. Will my hon. Friend ask the Minister what she will do to raise that with Cabinet members and ensure that they stop making things worse?

**Stephen Doughty:** I wholeheartedly agree with what my hon. Friend says. It is worth looking at the fact that in 2013 the UK was rated as the best place in Europe for LGBT+ equality. We had taken pride over many years in being a beacon of the furtherance of LGBT+ rights. Indeed, there was a broad political consensus around advancing those rights; let us not forget that it was a cross-party coalition of Labour, Conservatives, Lib Dems and other parties represented here that passed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. I was proud to serve on its Bill Committee.

However, today we see increasingly regressive forces in our politics, with sometimes explicit and sometimes more insidious attempts to divide and demonise our community; an increasingly hostile media and online environment; the influence of globally regressive forces, from Putin to the extreme religious right; and, across society more broadly, others vilifying our community and weaponising debates about our rights and, in many cases, even our existence. Shamefully for the Government, that means that since 2013, the UK has dropped to 14th place in the ILGA-Europe rainbow index, lagging behind the rest of western Europe.

Where once we had Prime Ministers who took pride in Britain being a leader on LGBT+ rights, we now see the plight of our community demeaned to cheap punchlines or political dog whistles. Where once we had consensus, compassion and kindness—and, indeed, legal action—now there is division, polarisation and a perpetuation of insidious culture wars. Quite frankly, we deserve better. Our constituents deserve much better.

I am proud that Labour has set out the need for a different approach—one that does not treat LGBT+ rights as a political football or an afterthought. It is a fact that hate crimes committed on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and disability are not punished as severely as those based on other protected characteristics. I am proud that we have committed a Labour Government to fixing that injustice by equalising the law so that LGBT+ and, indeed, disability-related hate crimes are treated as aggravated offences. We will provide real accountability and assiduously pursue those who seek to harm an individual on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

One of the most concerning trends in recent statistics is the 11% increase in hate crimes committed against transgender people. Tragically, I would think that that would come as no surprise to any of us in this room. We have all seen the way in which the discussions around these issues have been conducted in recent years, with escalatory rhetoric increasingly poisoning and polarising our discourse. Of course there are valid, important and complex issues to be discussed, but the lives and experiences of an already small and vulnerable community are increasingly abstracted into a reductionist zero-sum game and, in many cases, people are dehumanised and targeted.

We see it with the rise of anti-trans rhetoric online, as well as in cheap shots politically. We also see it quantitatively in surveys of British public opinion. The latest British social attitudes research reports that the proportion of British people who describe themselves as being prejudiced against transgender people has increased from 18% to 36% since 2019. Most alarmingly, we see it in the sharp increase in anti-transgender hate crime, which is up 11% in one year. In the past six months alone, Galop, which does excellent work, has seen a 76% increase in trans people seeking support to deal with serious incidents.

In closing, I ask the Minister for clarity in a number of areas. First, will the Government end what the Law Commission calls a “hierarchy of protection” and bring about real parity between groups of all protected characteristics, or will it fall to a Labour Government to find the courage to take that step forward? LGBT+ people rightly feel that the current political set-up is weighted against them because the Government have failed to make achievable and critically necessary reforms

such as introducing an inclusive ban on conversion therapy. How can the Government say that they are concerned with the plight of LGBT+ people while they continue to quietly acquiesce in that abhorrent practice? Lastly, given the shocking statistics, what specific support will the Minister give to the trans and non-binary community? Will she commit to stamping out the divisive and horrific rhetoric that comes from some parts of her own Government?

4.52 pm

**Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for bringing forward this important debate in such a timely manner, with the release of the latest hate crime statistics from the Home Office. It is a pleasure to see the Minister for Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), in his place. I am very grateful that he is here.

We do not have a lot of time, which is a shame because there is so much that could be said. However, there are some important things that I want to raise, to add to what the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth has already mentioned. I start from the position that the LGBT+ community has—and must have—the same right to live a peaceful life as anyone else in this country, but sadly that so often is not the case, as we see in the latest statistics. I refer to some of the work that I and the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) have done in this space over the past year or so as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT+ rights.

As we have heard, the statistics, although depressing in themselves, are actually only part of the picture, because there is massive under-reporting. Last year, the police recorded 24,000 hate crimes in England and Wales linked to sexual orientation and more than 4,700 cases linked to gender identity. Those figures represent increases of 112% and 186% respectively over the past five years.

As a London MP, it would be remiss of me not to mention Greater London, the Casey report and, not least, some of the tragic events that we have seen outside LGBT+ venues recently, including Two Brewers in Clapham not that long ago. Over the past five years in London alone—a city that we all assume is incredibly tolerant—hate crime has increased by 65% against people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and by 129% against those who have a transgender identity.

That is not helped by a lack of trust in the police, which was identified by the Casey report on the Metropolitan police. I welcome the steps that the new Met commissioner is trying to take to repair that, but trust in London's police has fallen to an all-time low of 64%. I would be grateful if the Minister outlined what discussions the Home Office has had with the Metropolitan police about the contents of the Casey report and how it intends to keep track of the quality of the improvements that the Metropolitan police must make to repair its relationship with the LGBT+ community.

It has already been mentioned that the Home Office's own blurb accompanying the statistics mentioned the public and toxic debate around trans rights that is happening in this place and across much of the media and academia. As many people in the Chamber have

[*Elliot Colburn*]

said, and as I have said before, we must find a way to lead from the front and take the heat and toxicity out of these discussions, because nobody wins from them. If any political party or candidate thinks that going into the next election on a platform of going after the LGBT+ community is smart—I am speaking to all political parties here; we have to be honest that all of us have had issues in our parties—they are mistaken. We must all stand up to that in our own political parties and try to stamp it out as much as possible. The LGBT+ community are not our enemy, they are not a threat and they are not dangerous. We cannot be surprised that trust in institutions such as the police reduces when these things are not stamped out.

Like the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, who spoke so eloquently about this, I have not been without attacks in my own constituency. Thankfully, I have never been physically assaulted, but I have been on the receiving end of homophobic abuse just going about my day-to-day work. Sadly, I am sure that other colleagues will bring up examples of what they have experienced. It is truly devastating, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said. It knocks it out of you and you wonder, “Why on earth am I putting myself in this position?” You think, “Why should I put myself in harm’s way? I don’t want to hold my partner’s hand in public. I don’t want to show affection in public. I don’t want to be my authentic self in public.” I am more worried about an attack than I am about being my authentic self. That absolutely is not right in 21st-century Britain.

**Hannah Bardell:** The hon. Member is absolutely right: if we are cowed and go into the darkness, the bigots win. In an interesting article, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that the US Christian right, militant European Catholics, Russian Orthodox hardliners and even sanctioned oligarchs are working concerted campaigns to undermine reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights across the world. We need to remember that when we talk to our own colleagues and others who seek to divide liberal democracies across the world.

**Elliot Colburn:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for bringing that up, because she is absolutely right. Indeed, we have seen that in the work we have done in the APPG on global LGBT+ rights, particularly in parts of east Africa—not least Uganda, where an anti-homosexuality Bill was recently passed. There is massive geopolitical influence, with efforts to push an anti-human rights and anti-LGBT+ agenda as a way of exerting influence. We must be able to track where the money is going. We know it comes from the actors that she eloquently outlined, and we must call that out and stamp it out as much as humanly possible.

I do not want to go on for much longer, but I have a few questions for the Minister and I would be grateful if she would cover them in her response. The Home Office’s hate crime action plan for England and Wales has not been updated for years. Will she commit to updating it? What discussions has the Home Office had with the Metropolitan police and other police forces about homophobia in their own forces and how they plan to rebuild trust with the LGBT+ community? Will she offer an assurance that despite some of the rhetoric we

have heard, it is a priority for the Home Office to get this right and to stamp that out? We were a leader in global LGBT+ rights. We must be a leader again.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. Before I call the next speaker, I ask colleagues to stick to between two and half minutes and three minutes, tops.

4.59 pm

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to speak in the debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on calling it. I am proud to speak as Plymouth’s first-ever out Member of Parliament, which gives me a special responsibility not only to share my personal experience, but to speak up for communities who often feel neglected and abused by those in this place.

We know that hate crime is on the rise. It is on the rise in Plymouth; it is on the rise in all our communities. As politicians, we can choose whether we calm things or fan the flames of hate. That is a choice we can make. Despite progress over many years, LGBT hate crime rose by 186% in the past five years, according to Stonewall. How we tackle that hate crime matters, and it requires leadership from the top.

Like many people, I have been attacked because of who I am. I am proud to be a massive gay: it is part of who I am, it is part of my identity and I celebrate it. My office has been vandalised with homophobic graffiti; I have had homophobic threats and messages left on my answer machine; and I have received an enormous amount of abuse simply for tweeting a picture of me and my boyfriend on Valentine’s day. That is an experience that happens to far too many LGBT people throughout the country—being authentically themselves makes them a target. We should be in no doubt that we must call that out. That is why in the run-up to the next general election, it is incumbent on us all, as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) said, to call out hate wherever it comes from—whatever dark recesses of the communities we represent—but especially from those people who aspire to and occupy the highest offices of our country.

We have had a Prime Minister who refused to apologise for calling gay men “tank-topped bum boys”. We have a Home Secretary who has accused LGBT asylum seekers of faking their sexuality. As an MP, I have campaigned hard to stop the Home Office deporting gay asylum seekers to countries where they would be killed because of their sexuality. We have had senior Tory MPs saying that marriage between men and women is “the only possible basis for a safe and successful society.”

I believe in the family—I think the family unit is at the heart of things—but I will not tell any single person what their family should look like. That is what we should aspire to.

When we have a Prime Minister whipping up transphobia, that is right out of the culture war playbook. That is why I want to ask the Minister whether she has heard of the CAT strategy, which will apparently form the basis of Government policy between now and the general election. It will focus on climate, asylum seekers



and trans people. The culture war playbook is deliberately designed to divide. Leadership matters. We need the right leaders who build bridges and take the difficult step to unite, not the easy step to divide.

Has the Minister heard of that strategy? What is she doing to police other Ministers who make such divisive comments? Has she called out the Home Secretary or the Prime Minister on their recent divisive comments? If she has not, who does that within Government? If we are to tackle hate crime, we need to tackle it from the top, which means making sure that all the words we use, all our behaviours and all the campaigns we run respect everyone being able to be authentically true to themselves and being able to do so safely in every part of our country.

5.2 pm

**Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Cummins. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I will speak briefly from my own experiences and perspectives as someone who, before my election to this place, was physically assaulted for being who I am. It is incredibly important that we tackle the root causes that motivate and cause such behaviours against members of the LGBT community, which is why I am so pleased to support the hon. Gentleman's debate.

As we tackle this hideous behaviour, though, it is also important that we lead by example and hold our own community to account, just as we would the wider public, because in the quest to reduce instances of hate crime against the LGBT community, we also have to look at our own behaviours within it. It is simply unacceptable for those who may well have been impacted by hate issues previously to provoke and manufacture homophobic hate against staff or innocent supporters of an MP for political purposes, especially when they are fuelled by alcohol. I am afraid that this is a growing issue and one that I have personally faced as recently as this week, in my home town of Sherborne. I put on the record my thanks to Dorset police for responding so promptly and for their help in calming an extraordinarily aggressive situation.

At Manchester Pride last year, the current shadow Leader of the House of Commons—the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who is a Labour Member—turned up with her supporters in T-shirts bearing the words “Never kissed a Tory”. I am sorry to say so, but she should be ashamed for doing that and for making some people—

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. Has the Member given notice of that?

**Chris Loder:** Yes, I have. As I was saying, I believe that the hon. Member for Manchester Central should be ashamed for doing that, and for making some people who do not share her political views uncomfortable for joining a Pride event—an event at which we should be united and not divided. I believe that it is as much our duty to call out such instances of hypocrisy within the community when we see them as it is to call out those outside the community who serve hate against us. I will not be threatened nor intimidated by that sort of nastiness. That kind of behaviour does not just stem from drunken

louts, but can start and be fomented by supposedly upstanding members of the community.

When such comments originate from those who hold elected office, I hope they are taken into account at election time. Where the proprietors of local businesses spread that form of hate, I hope their customers fully know the values of that business and consider to whom they give their custom in future. Manufactured hate against gay people by gay people for the purposes of political difference is still hate. It has no place in our society, nor in our community, and where it happens and has happened, I shall shine an intense light on it—as I hope everybody will.

5.6 pm

**Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be in this debate with you in the Chair, Ms Cummins. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing the debate on hate crimes against LGBT+ people as part of National Hate Crime Awareness Week.

I recognise that there is a rising trend of hate crime across the board, as our society becomes more divided. Those politicians who seek to peddle the politics of blame and division have a great deal of responsibility on their hands. We have seen a rise in that kind of politics across the globe, and sadly in some areas of our country. Today at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that

“the words we say here have an impact beyond this House.”

We have seen that sometimes global issues have an effect on levels of hate crime for other reasons, and we are conscious of that today.

We are also conscious of some others. Problematising members of the community, particularly trans members of the LGBT community, othering them, and perpetrating discourse that casts them as a threat and a danger to children—the usual tropes that many who are old enough and have been involved in politics as long as I have remember from the 1980s—can end only with one effect. It is the effect that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth outlined effectively in his speech, and that we have heard about in other contributions: a massive increase in hate crime on the basis of sexual orientation in the past five years, up 112%. Hate crime against trans people is up 186%. In Merseyside, where my constituency of Wallasey is, hate crime based on sexual orientation is up 162%, and against trans people it is up 1,033%.

I ask the Minister what the Government are planning to do, given that six Cabinet Ministers took to the podium to rail against the trans community and so-called gender ideology and wokeism at the recent Conservative party conference? The Home Secretary's speech was “a signal to people who don't like people who are LGBT+ people.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of the Conservative chair of the London Assembly as he was being thrown out of that conference. Let us get a grip. Let us remember that real people are involved. When hate crimes rise it ruins lives. Let us do something about it and let us unite to do so.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. I have to impose a time limit of two minutes.

5.9 pm

**Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate, and I am pleased to see the Minister present.

Many Members here today, in the most LGBT-represented Parliament in the world, are openly gay. We often reflect on how far we have come: same-sex marriage, equalised age of consent, the ban in the armed forces lifted, and the welcome recent apology by the Prime Minister for our LGBT veterans. However, the very fact that we are having this debate and the shocking statistics underlying it mean that there is no room for complacency.

Just over a week ago, I returned from a visit to Ghana as part of Parliament's delegation to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. There were other reasons for Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), to visit: we wanted to understand the situation with that country's horrific proposed anti-LGBT legislation, which actively reduces human rights and criminalises people for simply who they are and whom they love, and we wanted to share our story about our nation's progress.

Against the backdrop of a changing picture in parts of Europe, Africa and America, and a challenging dialogue in this country, we must be mindful of changes in the law and keep acting to protect human rights. I repeat my call for an inclusive ban on conversion therapy. The fact that we have people being abused, assaulted and, in the most extreme examples, stabbed and murdered in our country for just being who they are and loving whom they love is shocking and deeply saddening. Hate and abuse targeted towards anyone because of their sexuality or gender must never be acceptable in our community. This debate gives us an important opportunity to press the Minister to do more, and be seen to do more, to drive down the shocking statistics.

5.11 pm

**Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate and for his passionate speech, which I associate myself with very much.

The statistics that my hon. Friend set out were absolutely shocking, but they are only the reported crimes. As we know, only one in 10 LGBTQ+ people report hate crimes or incidents. It is even more worrying and upsetting that over recent months we have seen Government spokespeople specifically using trans people—who already struggle against prejudice day in, day out—as a political football, for no reason other than stoking a culture war.

The Government's words matter. I met a group of parents of trans young people in Salford on Sunday. The Government's words mattered to them, and they mattered to the young people. I heard stories about how horrified those young people were when the Prime Minister made certain statements during his conference speech, and how in some cases those young people felt they had no place in the world. Some had even considered

suicide. The Government must understand that their words have an impact, not just on increases in hate crime but on the mental health of the people they affect.

We have a moral duty in this place to speak up for those we feel are disenfranchised, and we have a moral duty to choose our words carefully. I am proud that Britain is a tolerant, respectful and inclusive country but, as the charity Stonewall states,

“a lack of positive action and threats to existing rights are taking the UK off course.”

We cannot allow that to happen. I urge the Minister to really take action today and listen to the words of my colleagues.

5.13 pm

**Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate and for the words he put so well.

In just over a month, on 20 November, we will mark Transgender Day of Remembrance. It is a moment for communities around the world to honour the memory of transgender people whose lives have been lost in acts of anti-transgender violence. In 2021, that was 375 people. We are facing a crisis. As we have heard today, LGBTQ+ hate crime is rising at a terrifying rate. The figures are startling, but what is worse is that they do not even represent the full picture. In the Government's national LGBTQ survey, more than 91% of respondents said that the most serious incidents they had experienced in the preceding 12 months had not been reported. Those incidents included sexual assault and physical violence. That evidence is supported by Galop, which has said so much in the last year. It has seen a 65% increase in LGBTQ victims coming forward for its support.

As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, we have slipped down the charts in terms of being LGBTQ+ friendly, and that should shame us all. Instead of taking steps to address the crisis, reduce hate and ensure that those who experience it can access all the support they need, our politics is focused on fuelling it:

“Transgender issues have been heavily discussed by politicians, the media and on social media over the last year, which may have led to an increase in these offences”.

Those are not my words, but the words of the Home Office. Filling the public domain with toxic language that dehumanises LGBTQ people has real, life-threatening consequences, and it is telling that those in this place who often spread hate are not here to listen to those consequences. When the Prime Minister suggests to his Conservative conference that transgender identities are not valid, his words do not go into a void: they have repercussions.

What must we do? We must get the hate crime action plan back and ensure that we bring in a total ban on conversion therapy. It is incredibly important that this issue is taken as seriously as it can be. We should stamp out hate as much as we can.

5.15 pm

**Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for an immeasurably heartfelt speech. He is so passionate about this issue, which we have discussed many times.

Hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation are up by 112% compared with this time five years ago. For trans people, that figure rises to 186%. Figures for West Yorkshire released in June 2022 showed a 39.9% rise in transphobic incidents in that year. Christina, a trans woman who supports victims through the charity TransLeeds, said that she was not surprised by the figure:

“I feel that is significantly low compared to what the real numbers would be because a lot of people don’t report. We still get a lot of mis-gendering, a lot of dead-naming. It doesn’t make someone feel safe when they are trying to report something that has happened to them.”

Last month, we heard our Home Secretary stand on the global stage and tell the world that being gay is not reason enough to seek asylum. There are still 11 countries where being gay carries the death penalty. Is the Home Office suggesting that we send gay people back to countries where they could be killed by their own Governments? Two weeks ago, the Tory party conference hinged on humiliating and scapegoating vulnerable people, with an obsessive focus on trans and gender non-conforming people. The Conservatives seem obsessed with trans and non-binary people. They tell us that our children are at risk simply because of the existence of LGBTQ+ people.

The moment we are in is a dark one. We live in a country that is unsafe for queer people, and have a ruling party that is fuelling transphobia and subsequent hate crime. Trans people and non-binary people have always existed. They will exist in spite of the vitriol, scapegoating and legislation. To any trans person listening, I want to address you directly. I see you, I stand with you and I respect you. I hope that in the face of this hardship, we can support you, and that we do much better for you in law.

5.17 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Cummins. I am grateful to be able to speak in the debate secured by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), which is particularly important in Hate Crime Awareness Week. His contribution was eloquent and moving, and some of the things he said should horrify us. We should be shocked to the core by the things that he shared, and we should all have pause for thought. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) also should have made us all think very deeply about the situation that our society faces.

The statistics shared by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) tell us about the huge increase in hate crime. She spoke about the increase in hate crime in relation to the transgender community, and we have heard clearly from a number of Members about how significant and troubling that is.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) correctly made a point about how frightening the increase in hate crime is. That is all very well but, as he said, it is not the full story, because we know that that crime is under-represented. We also know that it is significantly on the increase, not just here but around the world. That is a particular challenge when we think of the policies of the UK Government, who are not at all minded to consider that fact when they move people around the globe without thinking about the consequences.

It is a time of polarisation of views and positions, as is clear from the online space, if Members ever brave it. Social media companies as well as Governments have a responsibility to deal with the shocking and disgraceful commentary on social media. Fundamentally, no one’s identity should be up for debate. No point of view can possibly excuse hate crime. As politicians, we need to take some responsibility here. Are we always measured and considered? I would say no, not all of us are always measured and considered. We have heard very clearly about some of the commentary coming from the Conservative conference, for instance. I think that was a point well made. Culture wars should never be a political strategy. We should all call it out and be confident in doing so. We need to get a grip on the hostile language that the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) spoke about, because we know very well that it does embolden people to commit hate crimes against the LGBT community, who are just trying to live their lives, after all.

It is timely for us to point out how utterly unacceptable and troubling it is that we also see an uptick in other kinds of hate crime. Antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crimes are increasing at the moment. Whatever angle we look at this from, it is devastating to the LGBT community. It is damaging and erosive to all our communities. Everyone suffers when we accept this shocking attack on people’s identities. It is an unfortunate instinct of the UK Government to try to move along and pretend that this is not happening.

I wonder whether the Minister is able to answer the written question I submitted, which remains unanswered, about the draft Bill on banning conversion therapy. It is overdue, and I wonder if it is overdue because the Government do not want to answer it as they have no intention of following through on their previous commitments. That matters because that in itself has implications for hate crime and the way that people will be treated. As a useful political wedge for those who wish to seek division it might work, but we need to hear commitments here from the UK Government and the Minister that proper action will be taken to deliver a proper ban on conversion therapy, and that there is a commitment to recognising and understanding the impact on LGBT communities of hate crime.

I will conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington for saying very eloquently that the LGBT community are not our enemy; they are not a threat. I think that is a sensible point to conclude on, because he is right. It is time for us all here to say, “Enough,” and call it out.

5.22 pm

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair, Mrs Cummins. I would like to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this debate, which has been so well attended. When I was shadow Public Health Minister, I had the chance to collaborate with him on his vital work to end the transmission of HIV. His efforts there have been remarkable, and he has set the tone and brought the same kind of spirit to today’s debate. He talked about the stark and horrific reality of hate crime, which should act as a call to action. He made crucial points about reference, which were echoed by my hon. Friends

[Alex Norris]

the Members for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake). We as leaders have a real responsibility in this space.

The debate has been important. I am particularly grateful to colleagues who were able to talk about their personal experiences. People assume that as parliamentarians we are confident in always sharing what can be very deep parts of our personality, but it really has enriched the debate, and I am exceptionally grateful for that. My hon. Friends the Members for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) made really important points about under-reporting. Our efforts today and the leadership we show from this place—we must hear that from the Minister, and I will have some ideas myself—are the way to drive up reporting and build confidence. We know for too many people that confidence is not there at the moment.

I want to cover the point from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder). First, to be very clear, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) has a very diverse constituency in Manchester and represents all her constituents, no matter their background—political or otherwise. That T-shirt is not an act of hate. Similarly, we would not interpret condoms at Tory party conferences that say, “Labour isn’t working, but this condom will (\*99% of the time)”, as such. We take it in the spirit in which it was meant. I would be saddened if it was not taken in the spirit in which it was meant. I want to put that on the record.

In recent years we have seen incidents of hate crime rise significantly. Hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation have risen by almost 500% over the last decade. Crimes targeting transgender identity are up by 1,000%. We would expect to see some increase as we have, as a whole society, pushed to improve reporting, but even from isolating the data to the recent past four years—2018 to 2022—hate crime on the basis of sexual orientation is up by 41% and on the basis of gender identity by 56%. There is a problem here, and reporting alone cannot explain it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said, there are changes in all our communities.

LGBT+ people must be treated fairly, with dignity and with respect. As leaders in this place, our commitment is to treat these issues with sensitivity, rather than to stoke division and pit people against each other. We should be proud of our record as a tolerant country. We should be proud of our progress on equality. As the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) said, we should be overjoyed that we have the most out LGBT+ Members of Parliament of any legislative body in the world. But that progress is not inevitable. We need to hear the Government’s plan to reverse this trend in hate crime and to reverse how LGBT+ people feel today.

Where the Government will not step forward, we stand ready. We are proud that the previous Labour Government did more to advance LGBT+ equality than any in history and, if given the chance, the next will break new ground in this space, too. We would introduce a full and immediate trans-inclusive ban on

conversion therapy, protecting legitimate talking therapies but closing any consent loopholes that are put in the statute book in the meantime.

We will also strengthen and equalise the law so that anti-LGBT+ and disability hate crimes are treated as aggravated offences. In doing so, we would accept the Law Commission’s recommendations that the aggravated offences regime be extended across five protected characteristics: race, religion, sexual identity, transgender identity and disability. That will ensure that anyone who falls victim to hate crime is treated equally under the law and that the perpetrators of anti-LGBT+ and disability hate can no longer dodge longer sentences. Those commitments sit alongside our broader, crucial pledges to put 13,000 neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers back on our streets and embedded in our communities, so that they can build local relationships to combat hate crime and deter it through their visible presence.

**Florence Eshalomi:** My hon. Friend will be aware of the horrific attack at the Two Brewers in my constituency of Vauxhall on Sunday 13 August. I commend the organisation for working with the police: the perpetrator was caught a month later and he is still on remand. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need more police officers across all our communities to ensure that anyone committing these heinous attacks will feel the full weight of the law?

**Alex Norris:** Absolutely. We want to send a very strong signal that, under a future Labour Government, there would be 13,000 extra staff, compared with the 10,000 fewer we have at the moment, to take back our streets so that those who think they can break the law with impunity find out that they no longer can.

There is a significant point about charging. Our charging commission, chaired by former Victims’ Commissioner Dame Vera Baird, will be providing recommendations on raising the scandalously low charge rates that are so damaging to our justice system and are letting criminals off the hook. This is a plan to reverse a legacy of decline. We are determined to turn this situation around, and to make our streets safe with a police and justice system that is fit for the future and that the LGBT+ community can trust to combat hate crime and bring the perpetrators of it to justice.

5.28 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Miss Sarah Dines):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Cummins. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this debate. It was abundantly clear throughout his remarks that this subject is of significance to him. He relayed his thoughts and personal experiences and, like those of other Members who have contributed to the debate, they were thought-provoking and I thank him for them.

Although the debate is specifically about hate crimes that target the LGBT community, I want to echo the remarks that the Prime Minister made on Monday. He mentioned that hate crime takes various forms and that we must look at the antisemitism of the past few days. We must stand not only with our Jewish community, but with our British Muslim community, too. We stand

with both communities. I echo those remarks very firmly because they are important, and I want to lower the temperature of the debate. These matters are felt strongly not only by Members present, but by those in our communities. It does not help when intemperate language is used.

The Government are clear that there is no place for hate in our society. It does not reflect who we are: modern Britain. We are beyond that, but we still have room for improvement. Given the personal nature of these abhorrent crimes, I know how distressing they can be. I have heard some of the experiences of Members from across the House and the political divide. They are really thought-provoking. These things we are joined together on. I know how distressing these crimes are, as has been mentioned, for victims, their families, friends and the wider community. I therefore want to make it clear that any form of hate crime is unacceptable. The Government firmly believe that everyone should be able to lead their life free from discrimination, prejudice and hate. That is precisely why we are tackling all forms of hate crime, not lifting one or two above the other. They are all important to me.

One thing I was impressed with when I came into the House was just how these issues can be debated and how my own party has come so far in proposing marriage that had previously been unacceptable and representing the community. We are still world-leading; I think it is at our peril that we say we are not. There is always more to do, but we must not be too hysterical in language. That provides difficulties. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) pointed that out: it can be misused, and it should not be. We should be together on that.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Miss Dines:** I will carry on a little and then give way. A lot of specific questions were raised, and I want to answer them. I will then give way.

The UK has a proud history of protecting and promoting LGBT rights and the Government are committed to preserving that record. We are clear that victims of hate crime should be supported and the cowards who commit those hateful attacks should be brought to justice. I want to mention that I was delighted to see the Minister for Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), here. That shows the important work that he has been doing and I know through cross-departmental ministerial meetings that he is working incredibly hard on this. I too have spoken to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and the deputy commissioner on these issues as safeguarding Minister. They are taken very seriously.

Whatever some Opposition Members may say, I ask them to consider that we still have one of the world's most comprehensive and robust legislative frameworks for hate crime. Indeed, in 2018 the Government asked the Law Commission to conduct a review of the coverage and approach of hate crime legislation in England and Wales. The Law Commission provided a very long, detailed and considered report. We are grateful for those detailed considerations and for the work put into that. We have responded to and accepted one of the recommendations in that report and will respond to the remaining recommendations shortly.

On online offending, it is evident that in modern life intemperate and illegal remarks can be whipped up online. We continue to work to ensure that people are protected against criminal activity, including threatening behaviour both on and offline. In my work with the National Crime Agency and various police forces, I have found a high level of commitment to improving this arena. There are people doing some very good work, and we must not forget that.

We have robust legislation in place to deal with threatening and abusive behaviour or behaviour that is intended to or is likely to stir up hatred. That applies whether it takes place here, in the wider world, or online. Further to that, we are making hate crime a priority offence in the Online Safety Bill, which, as hon. Members will be aware, has recently completed its passage through Parliament and is awaiting Royal Assent. There are legal duties of care under which technology companies will need to prevent, identify and remove illegal content and activity online. That means that less illegal content, including content that incites hate on the grounds of race, religion or sexual orientation, will appear online and that when it does it will be removed quickly.

The Government have also worked closely to fund True Vision, which is just part of our commitment in this area, for online hate crime reporting. The portal is designed so that victims of all sorts of hate crime do not have to visit a police station to report. We also continue to fund the national online hate crime hub, which is a central capability designed to support individual local police forces in dealing with online hate crime. The hub provides expert advice to police forces to support them in investigating these despicable offences.

There is much other work being done by the Government to broaden education, such as providing more than £3 million in funding between August 2021 and March 2024 to five anti-bullying organisations. There is much work being done, too, in schools to tackle this sort of hate crime. Also, the curriculum in schools is drafted in a way that will promote greater understanding in the field. It would not be fair to characterise the Government as somehow not being engaged and working in this field.

**Luke Pollard:** Will the Minister give way?

**Miss Dines:** I want to go on to the issue of conversion practices, if I may; I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's patience. The Government have made it clear that conversion practices are abhorrent and have no place in our society. We are grateful to those who have responded to our consultation, which was very wide and well thought-out, and my ministerial colleagues will set out further details on that in due course. I cannot give a timeframe.

**Peter Gibson:** We have been promised "very soon" since January this year. Does the Minister have an update on specific dates?

**Miss Dines:** As a junior Minister, I have learned that "very soon" is quite an interesting phrase. All I can say is that hopefully we will have some news very soon.

**Luke Pollard:** Will the Minister give way?

**Miss Dines:** I will address one or two of the points made by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth. He asked whether the Government will end the disparity between the different forms of hate crime, and I know he feels strongly about this issue. It is something that the Law Commission has considered in its recent report. We are considering that further and, again, will have more details shortly.

The Government's has a proud record on LGBT rights. We have one of the most comprehensive and robust legislative frameworks, but the work on the HIV action plan—

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. It is up to the Minister whether to give way.

**Miss Dines:** I want to mention and praise the work of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth on the HIV action plan. We have announced an ambitious target to end new HIV cases by 2030, which represents a lot of work done by the defence community and the UK armed forces. A lot of work has been done there. I have mentioned the ban on conversion therapy, to which we are committed and which was raised by Members in the debate.

The rise in hate crime statistics has been mentioned. At first glance, it is very alarming. The good news is that, generally, hate crimes are on a downward trajectory. However, specific hate crimes, such as those targeted at LGBT people, are on the rise. There has been a characterisation of the figures as given, so I will go through the actual statistics. As hon. Members have said, transgender identity hate crimes have risen by 11%—from 4,262 to 4,732. That is the highest number since the statistics began in the year ending in March 2012, so it is of concern. However, it would be wrong to say that that has been prompted by any particular politician. The report says:

“Transgender issues have been heavily discussed by politicians, the media and on social media over the last year, which may have led to an increase in these offences, or more awareness in the police in the identification and recording of these crimes.”

When we look at statistics, we need to look at the independent assessor, who did not say that, in isolation, the rise in such hate crimes is because politicians are talking about it. It is because this issue is discussed online and in the media. More importantly—I have witnessed this myself—police officers are now more

likely to understand it and be able to report it than they were two, three, four or five years ago. Although it is alarming that hate crime in this field has risen by 11%, in some ways we must look for the positive, which is that more people are coming forward.

**Kirsten Oswald:** Will the Minister give way?

**Miss Dines:** I just want to make this point: more people are coming forward, which is good news that I welcome. More people are reporting this sort of crime. *[Interruption.]*

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. The Minister is out of time.

**Miss Dines:** I will make a concluding point. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) made some very important points, and I can speak to him afterwards—

**Judith Cummins (in the Chair):** Order. I call Stephen Doughty to sum up.

5.38 pm

**Stephen Doughty:** Thank you, Mrs Cummins. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members present today. I particularly thank Opposition Members, but I also want to thank Conservative colleagues for having the courage to speak up on these issues publicly and within their own party.

I am sorry to say that the Minister has shown how completely out of touch she and the Government are with the lived experience of LGBT+ people. To use words such as “hysterical” when we are talking about such serious issues is deeply disappointing. The evidence is there and is very clear. It is unequivocal: hate crime is up, people's experiences are horrific and we have slipped down the rankings. The question is: when will she and the Government do something about this, rather than just talking and offering warm words?

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of hate crime against the LGBT+ community.

5.39 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statement

Wednesday 18 October 2023

## SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

### Position, Navigation and Timing Resilience: Government Policy Framework

**The Minister for Science, Research and Innovation (George Freeman):** Position, navigation and timing services are vital for the UK economy, Critical national infrastructure sectors and wider society. Nearly all PNT services in the UK are provided by global navigation satellite systems, including the US global positioning system (GPS).

In the 2021 integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy the Government committed to strengthen the resilience of the PNT services on which our CNI and economy depend. The loss of PNT services also features in the 2023 national risk register, the external version of the national security risk assessment (NSRA), which is the Government's assessment of the most serious risks facing the UK.

I can today announce a Government policy framework for greater PNT resilience to meet this commitment in the Integrated Review.

*National PNT Office:* establish a National PNT Office in the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology—to improve resilience and drive growth with responsibility for PNT policy, co-ordination, and delivery.

*PNT crisis plan:* retain and update a cross-Government PNT crisis plan to be activated if GNSS-provided PNT is lost and identify and implement short term mitigations.

*National timing centre:* develop a proposal for a national timing centre—to provide resilient, terrestrial, sovereign, and high-quality timing for the UK (UTC(NPL)), including sovereign components and optical clocks.

*“MOD Time”:* develop a proposal for “MOD time” creating deeper resilience through a system of last resort and use NTC-provided timing to support MOD.

*eLORAN:* develop a proposal for a resilient, terrestrial, and sovereign enhanced long-range navigation (eLORAN) system to provide back-up position and navigation.

*Infrastructure resilience:* roll out resilient GNSS receiver chips, develop holdover clocks, and consider options for legislation on CNI sectors to require minimum resilient PNT.

*UK SBAS:* develop a proposal for a UK precise point positioning satellite-based augmentation system (SBAS-PPP) to replace the UK's use of the European geostationary navigation overlay service (EGNOS), monitor GNSS and enable GNSS-dependent high accuracy position for autonomous and precision uses.

*PNT skills:* explore options for centres for doctoral training in timing and PNT and review PNT skills, education, and training for long term sovereign PNT capability.

*Growth policy:* develop a PNT growth policy, including R and D programmes, standards and testing, to drive innovation for PNT based productivity.

*Next generation PNT:* deploy existing R and D funding into a UK quantum navigator and investigate possible options for a UK sovereign regional satellite system.

This policy framework builds on the previous work in Government on PNT, including the 2018 Blackett report, “Satellite-derived Time and Position: A Study of Critical Dependencies” and the work of the UK Space Agency's space-based PNT programme, which started in October 2020. The policy framework was produced by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, which worked with the lead Government Departments responsible for the CNI sectors in the UK to develop this agreed cross-Government position on national PNT resilience. Experts on PNT, both within and outside Government, and representatives of the PNT industry were involved with and consulted as part of the work to develop this policy framework.

This policy framework sets out, for the first time, what Government plan to do to improve the resilience of PNT services and support the economic opportunities that they enable. For those actions that require additional spending commitments, the newly established National PNT Office in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, point 1 of the policy framework, will work with other Government Departments over the coming months to develop business cases for this extra resource for consideration at the next spending round.

This PNT policy framework also supports the March 2023 UK science and technology framework and the UK becoming a science and technology superpower by 2030. It will lead to strategic advantage for the UK, create opportunities for greater international collaboration on PNT resilience, lead to greater investment in R and D and build PNT skills in the UK workforce.

As a first step to taking forward this policy framework I can also announce today that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology reallocated £14 million of existing funding at the end of the last financial year to the National Physical Laboratory's national timing centre research and development programme, which will now run until March 2025. This programme is the precursor to, and key building block of, developing a national timing centre, as outlined at point 3 of the policy framework.

The deployment of existing R and D funding into UK quantum navigation, in point 10 of the policy framework, is part of funding announced previously. This includes £8 million to fund 12 projects exploring quantum technologies for PNT that I announced during London Tech Week in June 2023, and a further £8.8 million for a specific quantum navigation project.

The UK Space Agency has also published today two documents from their space-based PNT programme: a summary of the technical concepts developed under the programme and an updated report on the economic impact to the UK of a disruption to global navigation satellite systems. I am placing a copy of both documents in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1073]





# Petition

*Wednesday 18 October 2023*

## OBSERVATIONS

### TREASURY

#### Face to face banking services

*The petition of residents of Hornsey and Wood Green,*

Declares that the petitioners are extremely disappointed at the announcement of the closure of Halifax's Muswell Hill branch in November 2023, further notes that bank branches are the heart of communities, and are relied upon by local communities, especially old and disabled people, those who need access to cash and those without internet banking; further notes that they are also vital for local businesses.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to act to protect essential in-person banking services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Catherine West, *Official Report*, 19 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 1329.]

[P002857]

*Observations from The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Griffith):*

The Government thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West MP) for submitting the petition on behalf of her constituents regarding the closure of the Halifax Muswell Hill branch and the provision of in-person banking services.

The Government are sorry to hear of her constituents' disappointment at the planned closure of the branch. The way consumers interact with their banking is changing. The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA)'s Financial Lives Survey found that in 2022, 88% of UK consumers used a form of digital banking, such as an app or online banking platform. Indeed, according to the branch closure document, over three quarters of the customers using the Halifax Muswell Hill branch have also used other Halifax branches, internet banking or telephone banking.

As with other banking service providers, Halifax will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering its strategy. Although the Government can understand constituents' dissatisfaction, decisions on opening and closing branches are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis.

The Government hope that the hon. Member can appreciate that it would therefore be inappropriate for the Government to intervene in these decisions. Government cannot reverse the changes in the market and in customer behaviour; nor can it determine firms' commercial strategies in response to those changes. Having the flexibility to respond to changes in the market is what makes the UK's financial services sector one of the most competitive and productive in the world, and the Government want to protect that. Indeed, a dynamic and competitive financial services sector drives innovation and incentivises banks and building societies to keep developing their banking products and services, creating better outcomes for customers.

None the less, the Government firmly believe that the impact of branch closures should be understood, considered, and mitigated where possible so that all customers, wherever they live, continue to have appropriate access to banking services.

Guidance from the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) sets out its expectation of firms when they are deciding to reduce their physical branches or the number of free-to-use ATMs. Firms are expected to carefully consider the impact of a planned closure on their customers' everyday banking and cash access needs and consider possible alternative access arrangements. This is to ensure that the implementation of closure decisions is done in a way that treats customers fairly. Last year the guidance was further strengthened to enhance protections for consumers that rely on branch services. The FCA is closely monitoring banks and building societies in this regard and if a firm falls short in their provision of reasonable alternatives, the FCA can and will ask for closures to be paused or for other options to be put in place.

In the customer information pack that Halifax has published for the Muswell Hill branch closure, customers are directed to the free-to-use ATMs at the nearby Nationwide Building Society, NatWest and Santander branches less than a mile away, as well as alternative Halifax branches in Wood Green—2.19 miles away—and North Finchley—2.7 miles away. Both of these branches are accessible from the closing bank branch via public transport.

Alternatively, Halifax customers can access everyday banking services via telephone banking, through digital means such as mobile or online banking and via the Post Office. The Post Office banking framework allows 99% of personal banking and 95% of business customers to deposit cheques, check their balance and withdraw and deposit cash at 11,500 post office branches across the UK.

The hon. Member highlights the experience of some of her constituents who are elderly or have disabilities. UK banks' and building societies' treatment of their customers is governed by the FCA in its principles for businesses. This includes a general requirement for firms to provide a prompt, efficient and fair service to all of their customers. The FCA's handbook requires firms to identify particularly vulnerable customers, and to consider the needs of these customers appropriately. Furthermore, the newly implemented FCA consumer duty builds on the FCA's work on vulnerability in recent years. It raises the standard expected from firms for all customers, including those in vulnerable circumstances. In addition, like all service providers, banks and building societies are bound under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments, where necessary, in the way they deliver their services.

Finally, in recognition that cash continues to be used by millions of people across the UK, the Government have legislated through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to establish a new legislative framework to protect access to cash. The Act establishes the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) as the lead regulator for access to cash and provides it with responsibility and powers to seek to ensure reasonable provision of cash withdrawal and deposit facilities for both businesses and personal customers. As part of this responsibility,

the FCA must also seek to ensure that there is reasonable provision of free withdrawal and deposit facilities in relation to personal current accounts from relevant providers.

In the context of the Government legislation, the financial services sector is working together to develop and provide shared services. This includes a process for LINK—which operates the UK’s largest ATM network—to assess a community’s access to cash needs. These assessments take place in the event of the closure of a core cash service or a request to LINK directly from a local community. As part of the assessment process, LINK takes into account relevant information such as

the size of the population, number of shops, demographic data and the nearest alternative services. In circumstances where LINK considers that a community requires additional cash services, participating firms within the financial services sector will provide a suitable shared solution, such as an ATM, deposit service, or shared banking hub, for cash users in that community. While the Government understand that LINK has not recommended an alternative cash service as a result of Halifax’s plans to close its Muswell Hill branch, petitioners may wish to contact LINK for further information. Contact details can be found on LINK’s website: [www.link.co.uk/consumers/request-access-to-cash/](http://www.link.co.uk/consumers/request-access-to-cash/)

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