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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 14 November 2023

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received a letter from the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), informing me of his resignation as Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I therefore declare the Chair vacant. I will announce the arrangements for the election of a new Chair in due course.

I would also like to draw Members' attention to the fact that the book for entering the private Members' Bills ballot is now open. It will be open until the House rises today and while the House is sitting tomorrow. The book will be available for Members to sign in the No Lobby until 6 pm on both days, at which point it will be taken to the Public Bill Office and will remain open for signatures until the rise of the House. The ballot itself will be drawn at 9 am this Thursday, in Committee Room 15.

An announcement setting out these and other arrangements, and the dates when the ten-minute rule motions can be made and presentation Bills introduced, has been published in the Order Paper.

We now come to questions to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. May I welcome the new ministerial team as a whole, rather than going through each of them individually?

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Pensions Triple Lock

1. **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of maintaining the pensions triple lock on the economy. [900035]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): As a result of the Government's triple lock, the basic state pension is now more than 50% higher in cash terms than it was in 2011. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is undertaking his review at the moment, and I cannot pre-empt that.

Richard Foord: Now that Lord Cameron has returned to the Cabinet, it is probably a good time for us to remember that the pensions triple lock was a Liberal Democrat initiative. The 2010 Liberal Democrat manifesto said:

"We will uprate the state pension annually by whichever is the higher of growth in earnings, growth in prices or 2.5 per cent."

Given that the triple lock has now been operational for more than a decade, will the Chancellor and his team commit to putting the triple lock in the next manifesto?

Laura Trott: Nice try. The triple lock was a Conservative invention, delivered by the Conservatives, and it is something to which we remain committed.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to her new role. Given that it is right that we look after our pensioners and ensure that people are well looked after in later life, it is important that we have the right tax base to fund our pensions. Will she meet me to consider ways in which we can make our taxation system more family friendly, to encourage more people to have more children and to ensure that we can pay for our pensions in the years ahead?

Laura Trott: My right hon. Friend is a brilliant advocate on these issues, and of course I would be delighted to meet him.

Food Inflation

3. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the level of food inflation. [900037]

4. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the level of food inflation. [900038]

20. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the level of food inflation. [900054]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): UK food inflation has been driven largely by global factors and has already fallen from 19.6% to 12.3%, and external forecasts expect it to continue to fall.

Alison Thewliss: Between March 2021 and April 2023, the cost of first infant formula increased by 24%, on average, with the cheapest formula on the market increasing by 45%. That is an absolute catastrophe for families who rely on infant formula, but a bonanza for the formula companies, which are making significant profits out of this. Can the Chancellor tell me why he believes it is right for companies to profit while families struggle to feed their babies?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw attention to the pressures on families caused by very high food inflation in a number of areas, but I can tell her that the Competition and Markets Authority, which undertook a review of the groceries sector earlier

this year, has not yet found evidence that high food price inflation is being driven by weak competition. But it is continuing its review and looking at the supply chain, and we will wait to hear what it says.

Deidre Brock: Recent research showed that the most significant decline in UK children's height in the global ranking came after the UK coalition Government launched their austerity programme in 2010. An expert in child growth rates at the Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health said of that 30-place drop in ranking that austerity

"has clobbered the height of children in the UK."

What lessons has the Chancellor learned from the UK Government's previous disastrous errors of judgment in this area, and how will he be supporting vulnerable groups in the future?

Jeremy Hunt: The lesson I have learned is straightforward: if we had not reduced the deficit by 80% between 2010 and the start of the pandemic, we would not have been able to help families across the United Kingdom with payments of more than £3,000, on average, including 700,000 households in Scotland and more than 1 million pensioners.

Patrick Grady: Even if the inflation rate is falling, food prices are still going up considerably. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reckons that they have gone up at least twice as fast as the value of benefits since September 2021. At the very least, can the Chancellor commit to ensuring that the Department for Work and Pensions has enough resource to raise benefits at least in line with September's inflation rate?

Jeremy Hunt: The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is doing his review at the moment to decide the correct amount by which to uprate benefits. If the hon. Gentleman looks at this Government's record, he will see that we took the decision a year ago to uprate benefits by inflation, and we committed to £94 billion of measures to help families get through the cost of living crisis.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Food inflation will only get worse if our self-sufficiency in food production drops. Will my right hon. Friend consider fiscal measures to discourage the transfer of food-producing land to other uses such as solar industrial installations?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to say that our food industry is very important to food security. We need to keep the priorities constantly under review. Nature is a very important part of that, but so too is food production.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is good to be addressing an elected Minister this morning. The consumer organisation Which? has described Tesco and Sainsbury's as committing "dodgy" practices over food prices and loyalty schemes, and Marks & Spencer has just posted record profits on food sales, yet people up and down the nations of the UK are struggling to pay their food bills. Will the Chancellor tell us which supermarkets he has held to account over rising food prices?

Jeremy Hunt: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we had the supermarkets in over the summer to make sure that they were doing everything they could to bear down on food price inflation. However, the correct way for politicians to look at this is at arm's length. We have the independent Competition and Markets Authority, which does a rigorous job and often does things that politicians disagree with, and it is looking at the issue right now.

Drew Hendry: In Canada, Ministers met the five largest grocery chains to get commitments on stabilising food prices. Other Governments are doing similar things. France's Finance Minister held extensive talks with the food industry to get it to commit to freezing or cutting prices on 5,000 everyday products. Is it not the case that, for people facing crushing food bills in Scotland and across the nations of the UK, this Westminster Government are doing absolutely nothing?

Jeremy Hunt: I think £94 billion of support to help families up and down the country, including with food prices and energy prices, is a rather different answer from saying that we are doing nothing.

Energy Sector

5. **David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con):** What fiscal steps his Department is taking to support the growth of the energy sector. [900039]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): Since March 2021, the Government have committed a total of £30 billion in public investment for the green industrial revolution. Since then, the Chancellor has announced £6 billion for clean heat and improving energy efficiency, and £20 billion for carbon capture, usage and storage. Alongside the launch of Great British Nuclear and the small modular reactor competition, the Government have also invested £1 billion in Sizewell C.

David Duguid: According to a recent survey, 90% of North sea oil and gas operators have reduced spending since the energy profits levy was introduced. I therefore welcome recent announcements on new North sea licences and the announcement before the summer of the energy security investment mechanism, by which the EPL will be removed when appropriate. Can my hon. Friend tell me when we can expect a response to the consultation on the ESIM and what plans this Government have to legislate for the mechanism? Will he meet me to discuss how investor confidence in our home-grown industry can be assured further?

Gareth Davies: Introducing the price floor for the oil and gas industry comes from the principle that, while it is right that oil and gas companies pay a higher share of tax during exceptional times, it is also right that when prices fall to normal levels, so do their tax rates. That is why we introduced the price floor in June and we have extensively engaged with the industry since then. I know that legislating will provide some certainty; we are looking carefully at that and will respond soon. I will always be happy to meet with my hon. Friend.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Labour party and the Co-operative party have set out a shared ambition for more community-owned energy. That is not new: in Denmark, 52% of wind energy is community owned, and in Germany half of all onshore wind is community owned. Will the Government do far more to join that ambition of community-owned energy here in Britain?

Gareth Davies: We have ambitious plans for energy generation and our energy security. We want to bring communities with us, and we look at all options as we do so.

Wealth Tax

6. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential merits of introducing a wealth tax. [900040]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Of course, the UK does not have a single wealth tax, but it does have several taxes on wealth and assets, and those generate substantial revenues. The Government are committed to keeping taxes low so that working people keep more of what they earn. The Government's approach to delivering fiscal sustainability is underpinned by fairness, with those on the highest incomes paying a larger share.

Rachael Maskell: But the burden of tax is increasingly falling on working people's incomes, while the richest 50 families in the UK have alone accumulated a combined wealth equivalent to that of half the population. Research from the University of Greenwich shows that a wealth tax could generate £70 billion for much-needed public services, so will the Government at least put forward a commission to investigate the matter and introduce a fair taxation policy?

Nigel Huddleston: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady is lobbying me or Opposition Front Benchers with her comments, but she will be well aware that we do have a progressive tax system in the UK. It is important to remember that the top 5% of taxpayers are projected to pay nearly half of all income tax in 2023-24; and the top 1% as much as 28%. Compared with what we inherited from Labour in 2010, when the top 1% of income tax payers paid 25% and the top 5% paid 43%, the tax system is fairer and more progressive under the Conservatives.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Those who live in homes with driveways pay just 5% VAT when they charge their cars from their home electricity, but those who live in terraced houses have to pay 20% VAT to charge commercially. Given that those who live in terraced houses are often less wealthy, will the Minister, whom I congratulate on his new role, meet me and other members of the Conservative Environment Network to look at how we might level out that anomaly?

Nigel Huddleston: My right hon. Friend is a great champion of such issues in her constituency and beyond. I am aware that she has already spoken to the Chancellor about this issue, but I would be delighted, as always, to meet her and discuss it further.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Government have done a lot to raise personal allowances, for which our party has advocated for many years. However, given that that is an improvement for people at the bottom end of the income scale, will the Treasury now turn its view towards hard-working, middle-income families, who also want a reduction in their tax burden?

Nigel Huddleston: We appreciate the support for taking 3 million of the lowest-paid people out of paying income tax altogether since 2010—an important and significant change. I understand the hon. Gentleman's comments, but I cannot comment further, especially this close to a fiscal event.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his new post. Does he share with me the humour that Opposition Back Benchers have proposals for new taxation that the Opposition Front Benchers are trying to bat away, while those of us on the Government Back Benches are telling the Government to cut taxes, and our Front Benchers keep batting that away?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I am afraid that what we are probably seeing is "same old Labour"—we have heard this all before. What they are proposing did not work in the '70s and it will not work now. We are very proud of our tax record, particularly taking the lowest paid out of income tax.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place. The Government have the opportunity next week to right an historical wrong by abolishing non-dom tax status. The Chancellor could use that money to get our NHS back on its feet and to provide free breakfast clubs for all primary-age children, just as Labour has called for. Is the abolition of non-dom tax status under consideration, or has the Prime Minister ruled it out again, for personal reasons?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that there are real dangers that what he is proposing would make the UK a less attractive destination—that is a very important issue. The City pays for a huge amount of our NHS, for example, and non-dom taxpayers were liable to pay £8.5 billion in UK income tax in 2021-22 and invested more than £7 billion in the UK.

Benefits Up-rating

7. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): If he will have discussions with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential merits of up-rating benefits in line with inflation. [900041]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): The Government are committed to supporting households with the cost of living, delivering over £94 billion of support, including up-rating benefits by 10.1% this year. As I have said, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is undertaking his review, and I cannot pre-empt that.

Wendy Chamberlain: Figures from the Trussell Trust show that food bank usage is at its highest ever level, and over the summer months a record 41,878 parcels of food were provided to 21,000 children in Scotland alone. Meanwhile, child poverty costs the Government £39 billion per year in poor health and educational outcomes. In order to tackle child poverty properly, will the Government commit to keeping benefits in line with inflation and lifting the two-child cap?

Laura Trott: We understand that things are really tough at the moment, which is why we have put in place £900 of cost of living support this year, but we also all need to work on bearing down on inflation. We are seeing it start to come down, but we know it is still too high, and we hope we will reach the Prime Minister's pledge of halving inflation, because that is the biggest help we can give to households this year.

Defence Sector Investment

8. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help mitigate the potential impact of environmental, social and governance practices of financial institutions on levels of investment in the defence sector. [900042]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): The Secretary of State for Defence and my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), recently set out that the values within ESG practices of financial institutions should never undermine capabilities developed to help us preserve peace and security. The Treasury recently consulted on a potential regulatory framework for ESG ratings providers, which aims to improve transparency and promote good conduct. I hope this will address some of the issues that defence companies have raised.

Alexander Stafford: ESG is so vital when it comes to investing in all our services, including defence. We were promised that the "Greening Finance" road map would come out at the end of 2022. Then we were told that the consultation would come out by autumn this year. It is still just about autumn, and it is yet to come out. Why are the Government kicking ESG down the road? Why have they stopped caring about ESG, and when will we have the consultation to get a UK green taxonomy sorted?

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. [Interruption.] I do; I know how much he cares about these issues and campaigns on them frequently in the House, and I commend him for it. The Government are committed to delivering on a UK green taxonomy to provide investors with clarity on which economic activity should be labelled as green. We expect to consult this autumn. The green taxonomy will provide an important tool for enabling the supply of relevant and reliable sustainability information for the market, and information will come in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One of the things that concern Northern Ireland MPs is the fact that when it comes to defence jobs and getting contracts, Northern Ireland falls behind. The Minister will be aware that Thales, on the border of my constituency,

was recently able to secure its workforce. What steps can he take to ensure that each region of the United Kingdom, but especially Northern Ireland, can benefit from defence spending for the workforce? We can do the job the same as everywhere else; we just need the opportunity.

Bim Afolami: I thank the hon. Member for his question, which is incredibly important. As he knows, this Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that jobs in the defence sector, within an ESG framework, are protected. I am happy to meet him to discuss further the issues relating to his constituency and Northern Ireland.

Student Loan Repayments: Inflation

9. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of inflation on the ability of graduates to repay student loans. [900043]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): Tuition fees have been frozen for 2023-24 and 2024-25, which will help affordability for future graduates. For new graduates, interest rates will move with the retail prices index but will have nothing added.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that response but, of course, interest rates have made matters much more difficult for graduates, who cannot afford to both pay off their student loan and buy their own property. Is there anything further that the Government can do to help graduates, who are struggling to do both? One of the things we could do is raise the threshold at which they start to pay back the loans.

Laura Trott: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The most important thing we can do is bear down on inflation, because that will bear down on interest rates, which affect us all. I would also point to the cost of living support that the Department for Education is providing for students. I would be happy to discuss the matter with him further.

Economic Growth

10. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the economic growth rate. [900044]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Our policies are increasing economic growth, as the Office for Budget Responsibility confirmed following last year's autumn statement and the spring Budget, but the only way to secure higher, sustainable, long-term growth is to bring down inflation.

Chris Elmore: The OBR judged the Chancellor's last Budget to have no overall long-term impact on the level of potential productivity. Does he expect the OBR to make a similar judgment of his next Budget?

Jeremy Hunt: I remind the hon. Gentleman of what the OBR actually said about the spring Budget: "the overall impact on GDP is around 0.2 per cent in 2027-28. This is the largest upward revision we have made to potential output within our five-year forecast as a result of fiscal policy decisions taken by a Government".

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Economic growth in northern Lincolnshire will be severely impacted if changes go ahead at British Steel's Scunthorpe works, which will result in redundancies and a massive impact on the supply chain. Will my right hon. Friend give an assurance that the Government will not proceed with any support for those changes until a full economic assessment of the impact on the local area has been carried out?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend and, indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) for their extensive lobbying on this very important issue. I have had meetings with him and her, and with many others, to discuss it. I reassure him that we are absolutely committed to steel production in the United Kingdom, and to making sure that any changes that are necessary support the local communities that depend on steel production.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I welcome the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) to her place. I look forward to holding her to account.

Last month, the Chancellor's National Infrastructure Commission said that in order to unlock the billions of pounds of private investment that is available to get our economy growing, we need a Government who can "make good decisions, fast." Why does the Chancellor think his Government have been making bad decisions slowly for quite so long?

Jeremy Hunt: It might help the hon. Gentleman if I tell him some of the facts on infrastructure. Since we made some reforms to the asset pooling framework in 2015, UK and global infrastructure investment by pension funds has grown from £1 billion to around £27 billion, and the Solvency 2 reforms could potentially unlock a further £100 billion-worth of investment.

Darren Jones: That, Mr Speaker, was a list of very slow decisions still being badly taken. The Labour party has a raft of plans available to help drive economic growth and investment in every corner of our country, from speeding up the grid to accelerating planning for critically important infrastructure. Today, I am making them available to the Chancellor for free. Would he like them, or would he rather call a general election?

Jeremy Hunt: Unfortunately, nothing is free from the Labour party. Funding plans by increasing borrowing by £28 billion a year leads to higher bills for families, higher energy prices and higher mortgages.

Pension Scheme Investment

11. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage pension schemes to invest in the UK. [900045]

13. **Nadhim Zahawi** (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage pension schemes to invest in the UK. [900047]

Mr Speaker: While we are basking in those questions, would somebody like to answer them?

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): In my speech at Mansion House in July, I announced reforms to boost pensions, increase investment in UK businesses, and improve UK capital market competitiveness. Those reforms could result in over £1,000 a year of additional retirement income and unlock £75 billion-worth of investment in high-growth businesses.

David Simmonds: Many local authorities have given the investment managers for their pension funds a mandate to invest in infrastructure. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to encourage greater infrastructure investment by UK public sector pension funds?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in this issue—of course, he has great experience of local government. Working with the former Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who I see is in the Chamber, we announced major reforms in July to help local government pension funds lead the way in the transformation we are looking for, in particular by sending a direction that they should invest in pools worth more than £50 billion. That will make it easier for them to have the expertise necessary to invest in infrastructure.

Nadhim Zahawi: I welcome the proposals that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made in his Mansion House speech, which will increase investment in the United Kingdom. In his upcoming autumn statement, I implore him to build on his Budget announcement with a policy that was originally advocated for in a paper by the Adam Smith Institute, a think-tank I am proud to be patron of, as is set out in my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I implore him to make full expensing permanent and to scrap the hated factory tax.

Jeremy Hunt: I have a very small bone to pick with my right hon. Friend, because when I became Chancellor I was hoping to say that I was the first Chancellor who was once an entrepreneur, but he pipped me to the post. However, he is absolutely right to say how important it is to have competitive business investment taxes. I was very proud in the spring Budget to introduce full expensing for three years, which gives us some of the most competitive business taxes in the OECD. Only five other countries do that, and I will of course keep under review any possibility to extend that tax break.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): Is investment not needed in the UK given that 13 years of Tory rule have resulted in a £137 billion UK deficit? Meanwhile independent Ireland has a €10 billion surplus from its economic growth and investment. That is an Ireland without the oil or natural resources of Scotland, which is now about to start a sovereign wealth fund. Where did the failing crisis-hit UK go wrong and independent Ireland go right? The clue, by the way, is in the question.

Jeremy Hunt: I find that a very curious question. If the hon. Member is proud of Scotland's natural resources, why does he want to cancel North sea oil and gas exploration, which is the very thing that can give families across the United Kingdom security from the energy shocks we have seen from things such as the invasion of Ukraine?

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): There is encouraging news in that the Pension Insurance Corporation has recently announced that it is going to invest in helping to support the building of 1,200 new affordable homes in this city. Does the Chancellor agree that pension funds could be a very important source of capital for developing social rented housing around the country—Eden Housing Association, South Lakes Housing, and Westmorland and Furness Council, for example? Will he look at the rules and bring in greater incentives for pension investment funds to invest in affordable housing across the country?

Jeremy Hunt: We are already working on proposals in that very area. Broadly speaking, we have one of the most robust and resilient pension fund sectors in the world, but we are doing a lot of work to remove the barriers to investing back into the UK. Things such as affordable housing, infrastructure and our growth businesses are areas of great potential.

Public Sector Productivity and Public Spending

12. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase public sector productivity. [900046]

15. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure value for money in public spending. [900049]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): My hon. Friend is rightly very focused on making sure that every single pound of taxpayers' money is spent wisely, and I can assure him that the Government share that goal. In June, the previous Chief Secretary to the Treasury launched the public sector productivity programme, and we will provide an update at the autumn statement.

Marco Longhi: Estimates show that the public sector today is 7.5% less productive than in the environment just before covid. Does the Minister agree that this could possibly be down to a continued more liberal working from home ethic? How much is this costing the taxpayer?

Laura Trott: My hon. Friend is right that public sector productivity must be improved. That is exactly what the review is looking at and what we will address. I look forward to talking to him more about it in due course.

Alex Cunningham: I welcome the fact that the taxpayer has spent hundreds of millions of pounds on remediation work at the Teesworks site in Redcar. I do not welcome the fact that the assets, including 90% of the operating company and tens of millions of pounds of scrap, have been handed over by the Tees Valley Mayor to two private companies, whose owners are laughing all the way to the bank. Is that really good value for taxpayers' money?

Laura Trott: I think these claims have been addressed by the Mayor, and I will not have anything further to say about them.

Fuel Poverty

14. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What fiscal steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support households in fuel poverty. [900048]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): The Government have taken significant action to help households with rising energy prices and the costs of living by providing one of the largest packages of support in Europe, totalling £94 billion.

Mr Carmichael: Orkney and Shetland have the worst rates of fuel poverty of anywhere in the country. Provisional figures show that, for last winter, both Orkney and Shetland recorded record levels of winter mortality. In his new office, will the Minister bring his colleagues together from across Government to hear from agencies such as THAW—Tackling Household Affordable Warmth—in Orkney that are working to tackle fuel poverty, because if we can tackle fuel poverty in Orkney and Shetland, we can tackle fuel poverty?

Gareth Davies: We are incredibly sympathetic to the right hon. Gentleman's constituents, who have suffered a very difficult time. That is why we introduced the energy price guarantee, which will remain in place until March 2024 as a safety net. We continue to engage with lots of stakeholders and we are very happy to include the ones he suggests.

Mortgage Support

16. **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support homeowners with their mortgages. [900050]

21. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of changes in mortgage interest rates over the course of this Parliament on household incomes. [900055]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): The path to lower mortgage rates, as everybody in this House knows, is through lower inflation, which is why the Prime Minister and the Chancellor made halving inflation one of our five priorities for this year. The latest Bank of England forecast shows that we are on track for that. In June, lenders representing more than 90% of the mortgage market agreed to our new mortgage charter, which includes new flexibilities to help customers manage their repayments, backed up by UK Finance's advertising campaign encouraging anyone worried about their repayments to contact their lender.

Nick Fletcher: Does the Minister agree that the best way we can help the next generation of homeowners is to increase the supply of homes, bring back the help to buy ISA and stop the 35-year mortgage shared-ownership models, which only increase house prices?

Bim Afolami: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. On his first point, we are increasing the number of homes and we are optimistic that we will reach our target of delivering 1 million new homes over this Parliament. Secondly, the help to buy ISA was closed to

new accounts in 2019, but existing holders can continue to save into their accounts. On his third point about stopping 35-year mortgages, it is important to have choice in the market and for people to make those choices for themselves. As a Government we are committed to supporting people doing just that.

Steve McCabe: According to the Centre for Economics and Business Research, mortgage increases are expected to cost UK households £9 billion this year and next. How on earth do the Government defend that?

Bim Afolami: As the hon. Member knows, the reason why we are in this position is that there is a global phenomenon. We are doing what we can. We are working closely with the Bank of England and, over time, due to the policies of the Chancellor, the Prime Minister and this Government, interest rates will come down.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) to his post as Financial Secretary.

It has been a year since the Conservatives crashed the economy. In 2023 so far, 1.5 million fixed-term mortgages have expired, leaving working people facing sky-high increases in their mortgage costs. For people living in Wellingborough, for example, this Tory mortgage penalty means that households are paying another £190 a month on top of everything else in a cost of living crisis. The truth is that working people are paying the price for the Conservatives crashing the economy last autumn. Does the Economic Secretary think that is fair?

Bim Afolami: I thank the shadow Minister for his kind words, at least in relation to me.

It is important to recognise that in the eurozone, the United States and the UK there have been broadly similar increases in inflation and interest rates. We as a Government are confident that our policies will bring those down in due course.

Cost of Living: Scotland

17. **Michael Shanks** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): Whether he has had recent discussions with the Secretary of State for Scotland on the impact of increases in the cost of living on the Scottish economy. [900051]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): We have announced UK-wide support for households, including cost of living payments, the energy price guarantee and the energy bills support scheme. Taken together, support for households is worth £94 billion and is among the largest packages in Europe.

Michael Shanks: The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently reported that wages in Scotland have risen by 1.5% since 2015, compared with 5% in England. In the face of a cost of living crisis brought about by the Conservative party's disastrous mini-Budget, wages simply are not keeping up with the cost of living. What can the Minister commit the Government to doing next to help make work pay? Will she, for example, support Labour's new deal for working people?

Laura Trott: I was pleased to see this morning's figures, which show that wages are going ahead of inflation. This is very good news and I hope it spreads to Scotland.

Non-domiciled Residents: Tax Status

18. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Whether he plans to change the tax status of non-domiciled residents in the UK. [900052]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): The Government want the UK to have a fair and internationally competitive tax system, designed to bring in talented individuals and investment that contributes to the growth of the UK economy. Non-domiciled individuals play an important role in funding our public services through their taxation contributions, and they pay UK tax on their UK source income and gains in the same way as everybody else.

Luke Pollard: The non-dom tax status allows people to dodge millions in taxes. Germany, France and Canada have closed their non-dom tax loopholes. Can the Minister explain to taxpayers in Plymouth and across the country why he thinks it is fair that people who live here do not pay their taxes here?

Nigel Huddleston: As I said in the answer I gave some moments ago, non-dom taxpayers make a significant contribution to UK tax, worth £8.5 billion in 2021-22, with £7 billion more invested. The City, for example, pays half the cost of the NHS.

Mortgage Interest Rates

19. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of trends in the level of mortgage interest rates. [900053]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): The Government's mortgage charter is providing support to vulnerable households, and arrears and repossessions remain at historic lows. Government support has helped real household incomes rise by 2.7% year on year in the latest data.

John Mc Nally: With the economy flatlining and interest rates remaining at 5.25% and more than likely to remain above 5% next year, it simply follows that households' disposable incomes will continue to be squeezed throughout 2024. Surely the Chancellor agrees that mortgage interest tax relief must be reintroduced to support households facing high interest rates alongside inflation.

Bim Afolami: As the hon. Member has already heard from the Chancellor, the economy is still growing. The latest labour market data shows that incomes are going up at a higher rate than inflation, so I do not recognise the picture that he paints.

Household Finances

22. **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): What assessment he has made of the financial position of households during winter 2023-24. [900056]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): The Government continue to stand by households with one of Europe's largest support packages, amounting to some £3,300 a household on average across 2022-23 and 2023-24.

Ben Lake: The Minister will be aware that a big concern for rural constituencies is the cost of fuel. The RAC has found that the margin enjoyed by the big supermarkets on fuel sales in October was double the figure for the year to date at 14p per litre. That reflects concerns raised by the Competition and Markets Authority that although wholesale fuel prices fell in September and October, retail prices did not. What is the Treasury's assessment of the impact that these higher margins will have on households in the coming winter?

Gareth Davies: Fuel duty is a major cost for households and businesses. We recognise that. That is why in the spring Budget 2023, the Chancellor extended the 5p temporary duty cut. That was a £5 billion saving for motorists, worth £100 for the average motorist, but we always keep these things under review.

Economic Growth: Essex

23. **Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** What steps he is taking to support economic growth in Essex. [900057]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): As my right hon. Friend knows, the Government are committed to supporting economic growth all over the country, but particularly in the wonderful county of Essex. The recently announced £1.1 billion long-term plan for towns will, for example, provide £20 million of flexible funding over 10 years to Clacton, and there are many other measures.

Priti Patel: I welcome my hon. Friend to his new role. I hope that he will know not only that the only way is Essex, but that Essex is a net contributor to the Treasury. We want more economic growth in Essex. In a week's time, we will have the autumn statement, so may I give a message to those on the Treasury Front Bench? May I appeal to the Chancellor in particular to look at lowering the rates of personal and business taxation, particularly the areas of business rates, corporation tax and all aspects to do with enabling people to keep more of the money they earn?

Bim Afolami: My right hon. Friend tempts me to make tax policy. What I will say to her is that she will know that the Chancellor always keeps these things under review, as do the Government. Indeed, we have a fiscal event shortly.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Can I ask the Minister why he said he wants particularly to support investment and growth in Sussex? [Interruption.] Is that the Tories reverting to type in terms of the blue wall?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think it was Essex, not Sussex.

Alan Brown: They are all the same to me.

Mr Speaker: Have you got a question? I do not think an answer is needed.

Life Sciences Sector

24. **Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con):** What fiscal steps he is taking to support the growth of the life sciences sector. [900058]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): Life sciences are one of the Chancellor's key growth priority areas. In May, he announced a significant new policy package, backed by more than £650 million of funding, reaffirming the Government's commitment to supporting a thriving life sciences industry.

Julian Sturdy: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Life sciences are incredibly important, so will he focus investment on them in projects such as BioYorkshire on the edge of my constituency, which brings together private, public and academic institutions for huge benefits right across the board?

Gareth Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the benefits and importance of life sciences to the country. We are genuinely a world leader: I was out in Boston in the United States seeing the other world-leading area for life sciences, and it is not a patch on ours. That is why, as an example, we are looking to support life sciences through the investment zone programme, but, as I said, they are a key priority for the Chancellor as part of his growth agenda.

Topical Questions

T1. [900060] **Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): As we have a debate this afternoon, I will limit my comments to welcoming my outstanding new colleagues. The new Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), will brilliantly solve the problem of how we stop the state expanding, building on the work of her wonderful predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen). The new Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), will single-handedly ensure that the City and stock market remain competitive, building on the superb foundations laid by his predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith). The job of the new Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), will be to work out how to bring taxes down, following in the footsteps of his excellent predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who as Health Secretary will no doubt be trying to push them up.

Marco Longhi: There is widespread consensus that growth is essential to the economy. With 800,000 fewer self-employed in the economy post covid and post IR35, does the Chancellor agree that increasing the VAT threshold to £250,000 for new registrations would boost growth and be a net gain in revenue terms in the long run?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the support we give to small businesses. As he will know, supporting small businesses, particularly by rolling over

the retail, hospitality and leisure business rates discount of 75%, was a major feature of the autumn statement. We will continue to keep under review anything that we can do to help our small businesses.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I welcome all the new Ministers to their roles and wish them well in them. The covid inquiry is uncovering unsavoury examples of Government mismanagement. We already know that Ministers ignored warnings that their business loan schemes were vulnerable to organised crime, yet the Prime Minister left the vaults open to fraudsters. Will the Chancellor update the House on the latest estimates of taxpayers' money lost to fraud from the covid support schemes?

Jeremy Hunt: I am happy to tell the shadow Chancellor that as of September 2023, HMRC's compliance effort on covid-19 support schemes, which started when the schemes were set up in spring 2020, had prevented the payment of or recovered the overpayment of more than £1.6 billion of grants.

Rachel Reeves: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer, but according to the House of Commons Library's most recent numbers, covid fraud losses total a staggering £7.2 billion—that is bigger than the fiscal headroom that he had in his spring Budget. More stories are coming to light about companies with undeclared interests and personal protective equipment contracts not delivering to the standards required. Ahead of the autumn statement, will he confirm that the Government have also had to write off more than £8.7 billion from pandemic PPE contracts?

Jeremy Hunt: Let me say two things. First, we have no quarter with any incidence of fraud. We have commenced 51 criminal investigations into suspected fraud cases and there have been a total of 80 arrests so far. Let me also say that during the pandemic we introduced £400 billion of support to businesses and families up and down the country and, according to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, the result is that our economy is nearly 2% bigger than pre-pandemic, while Germany's, for example, is only 0.3% bigger.

T3. [900062] **Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con):** Primary care capital allocation has pulled the short straw for decades. May I encourage Treasury Ministers to look across Government and with developers—retrospectively if necessary—to ensure that when we build huge new housing estates, the primary care promised in the planning permissions is actually provided?

Jeremy Hunt: I will take this question as well because my hon. Friend has lobbied me personally on this issue. Literally no one in this House has worked harder on it than he has. I have an example of the very problem he is talking about in my own constituency. He is right that it takes too long for housing development capital to reach NHS primary care projects. We will look into the issue carefully.

T2. [900061] **Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab):** In my constituency we are faced with the potential closure of vital public services such as Cleckheaton town

hall, Claremont House dementia care home and Batley sports and tennis centre. Ultimately, that comes down to cuts imposed on Kirklees Council of more than £1 billion since 2010. Ahead of next week's autumn statement, what conversations has the Chancellor had with his colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that our local authorities are properly funded and the future of our vital public services is protected?

Jeremy Hunt: I am answering a lot of the topical questions today because I have a new team. I want to reassure the hon. Lady that we are very aware of the financial pressures that local authorities are under. I am having extensive discussions with the Communities Secretary.

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

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): On the Conservative Benches we all agree that the way to sustainable economic growth without inflation is through business investment. It is early days, but I wonder whether we have indications of how well full expensing is working for encouraging business investment in this country. Is the Chancellor considering making that full expensing permanent next week at the autumn statement?

Jeremy Hunt: I welcome my hon. Friend's interest in the topic. One of the reasons why our productivity is 15% lower than Germany's, for example, is that it invests 2% more as a proportion of its GDP than we do in the UK. Improving the rate of business investment is one of the most effective ways to boost productivity and people's real disposable income. We are proud of what we introduced in the spring Budget, and we will continue to see whether it is possible to extend it further.

T4. [900063] **Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab):** London's homelessness challenge is at crisis point. More than 1 in 50 Londoners is in temporary accommodation. That equates to one child in every classroom. Given that in some boroughs, only around 2% of properties are affordable for rent on local housing allowance, what assessment has the Chancellor made of the adequacy of local housing allowance rates?

Jeremy Hunt: With the Work and Pensions Secretary I continue to keep under review all the things that have an impact on poverty rates. We are proud to have made progress in reducing the number of people living in absolute poverty after housing costs by 1.7 million since 2010. When it comes to homelessness, we are investing £2 billion over the next three years. Rough sleeping is down 35% since its peak.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Member's Financial Interests. The Chancellor has acknowledged that investment trusts, which make up one third of all FTSE 250 companies, are being plagued by misguided cost disclosure legislation, which is making them appear unduly expensive. That is restricting investment and does not happen in any other country. In addition to the positive dialogue between us and with the Financial Conduct Authority, will he consider supporting the

First Reading of Baroness Altman's private Member's Bill in the other place next week, which helps to address this issue? Will he also address it in his autumn statement?

Jeremy Hunt: I welcome my hon. Friend's expertise in this area, which is of great benefit to the House and to me as I consider fiscal measures. As we are so close to the autumn statement, I would say that the way that we treat costs in our investment and pension funds industries is not optimal, and we need to reform it.

T5. [900064] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): A short time after the former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), said he was "alarmed" by the amount of tax people are paying, he was out of a job. Was he sacked for highlighting the Government's tax burden, the highest for 70 years?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) did an excellent job and we all salute his brilliant work. If he were here now, he would remind the hon. Gentleman that we have the lowest tax burden of any European country in the G7.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I know that the Chancellor is aware of just how important the whisky industry is to the economy of rural Scotland. It was very disappointing that the policy of a duty freeze was not continued in the Budget. Can he offer any reassurance that we will return to the policy of duty freeze in the autumn statement, and in next year's Budget?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): We are incredibly supportive of the Scotch whisky industry. In fact, the Scotch Whisky Association was my first meeting in post. In nine out of 10 previous fiscal events we either cut or froze duty on whisky, and we have acted to remove punitive tariffs on Scotch whisky in the US market. It will not be a surprise to my right hon. Friend that all taxes remain under review and he will not have long to wait until the next fiscal event.

T6. [900065] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): Banks are taking advantage of higher interest rates to make bumper profits. A new poll shows that people have had enough, with big support for a one-off windfall tax on bank profits, yet the Government have chosen to slash the surcharge on bank profits. Is it not time for a windfall tax on excess bank profits to help people who are hit hard by this crisis?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Bim Afolami): There are two things I would say in response to that. First, it is important, when we talk about banks, that we have a globally broadly competitive tax regime, and we do not apologise for that in the Treasury. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman should bear in mind that the reduction he talks about in terms of the levy on banks was offset by rising corporation tax.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I thank the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) for his recent visit to Darlington, where he opened a new branch of Darlington Building Society. He will know

from that visit the impact that Treasury jobs are having locally, including an additional £80 million of spending in our local economy. Does he agree with me that Darlington Economic Campus is a fantastic levelling-up project, ensuring that people can stay local but go far?

Gareth Davies: It was a great pleasure to visit my hon. Friend and open the Darlington Building Society in his town, a very prominent business that is important for in-service banking facilities. The Darlington campus is an important part of our Treasury levelling-up agenda and long may that continue.

T8. [900067] **Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): More than 3 million households in the UK owe an estimated £2.7 billion in the unregulated buy now, pay later sector. The Labour party has set out plans for urgent regulation of the sector. Can the Minister confirm when the Government will do the same?

Bim Afolami: This is a complicated area of regulation and we are looking at it very closely. The consultation closed in April and we are working on it because it is very important we get it right, but I hear the hon. Lady's concerns and will update the House in due course.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): While the shadow Chancellor was busy scrolling through Wikipedia to copy and paste, the actual Chancellor has to look no further than the New Conservatives tax plan, which outlines scrapping the IR35 reforms, increasing the VAT registration threshold to £250,000, and delivering on the Prime Minister's pledge when he was Chancellor to bring a 1p cut in income tax in 2024.

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for adding to the litany of options I have in front of me for the autumn statement. What I can say to him is what I said in my party conference speech: we are committed to lowering the tax burden and will do so as soon as it is responsible to do so.

T9. [900068] **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): Some 28% of people in Chester have a mortgage and they are still bearing the burden of the Government's disastrous mini-budget. They deserve peace of mind that mortgage rates will come down soon, so what is the Chancellor going to do about it?

Jeremy Hunt: Can I say gently to the hon. Lady that interest rates have gone up by 3% in the UK since then? That is just above the United States and just below the eurozone, so this is a global phenomenon. There is no short cut to bringing down interest rates. We have to support the Bank of England as it bears down on inflation and then we can bring mortgage rates down.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): Will the Chancellor look at the red tape around the apprenticeship levy? Many businesses in my area, such as Asda, Amazon and DPD, all say that they want to take on more apprenticeships but that the red tape around how they spend the money is very difficult. This is something that he could change overnight, and really help to grow and boost our economy.

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the apprenticeship levy, which has been a tremendous success in bringing a rigour to technical qualifications that was not there before. We are very open to reforms to the apprenticeship levy, providing they stick to the fundamental principle that any investment is not in in-house training that would otherwise have happened, but in transferrable, passport-able training that someone can take with them if they move to another business.

T10. [900069] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The NHS dental plan has been stuck in the Treasury for months, while my constituents are waiting years to see an NHS dentist. When the Chancellor makes his autumn statement, will he also release the dental plan with the funding that is required so that we can get dental treatment back on track for our constituents?

Jeremy Hunt: I will not pre-empt what I am going to say next week, but I will say to the hon. Lady that, as a former Health Secretary, I am well aware of the pressures on NHS dentistry and its importance to all our constituents.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Given that inheritance tax is the least popular of all taxes at every income decile and that scrapping it would not be inflationary, will my right hon. Friend consider doing so?

Jeremy Hunt: That was a very nice try, but my hon. Friend will have to wait for a week.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Opt-out savings are a little like auto-enrolment in pensions. They help those on lower incomes to save for a crisis—for the proverbial rainy day. Given that more than 9 million people in this country are in work with no savings at all, will the Chancellor note the impressive results of a small trial of the opt-out savings system in Manchester, and encourage its expansion?

Jeremy Hunt: I would be happy to do that. The hon. Gentleman is right: if we are to grow faster as an economy, the other side of the coin is we that need to save more, and we should be encouraging everyone in all income groups to do so.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend seek to fix the anomaly that sees man-made fully synthetic fuels taxed at the same rate as their fossil equivalents?

Jeremy Hunt: I shall be happy to look into that issue in detail and get back to my hon. Friend.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Yesterday in the House, in the context of Labour's plan for a health service, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions referred to the "poor old non-doms". Does the Chancellor agree with his colleague that people who live in this country but do not pay their taxes here can be accurately described as poor?

Jeremy Hunt: Because we attract wealth creators from all over the world—and this may be uncomfortable for those on the Opposition Benches—we generate huge amounts of tax revenue. Financial services pay for half the cost of running the NHS. I am in favour of getting everyone to pay their fair share of tax, but I will not make reforms that mean less tax revenue for the NHS.

Mr Speaker: I call David Linden to ask the final question.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Westminster-made cost of living crisis is having a devastating impact on household incomes, particularly in Broomhouse, where many young homeowners are seeing mortgage prices soaring. Will the Chancellor use the autumn statement to introduce mortgage interest tax relief to help people across Glasgow to deal with the cost of living crisis?

Jeremy Hunt: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have taken enormous steps over the past year to help families throughout Scotland to deal with cost of living pressures. If he really thinks that people in Scotland believe that this was a "made in Westminster" problem, when we have experienced an invasion of Ukraine and a global pandemic, I simply say to him in return that after 16 years of SNP rule, GDP per head in Scotland is lower, productivity is falling, employment is lower, and inactivity is higher—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Members need to give me a good reason not to bring them in at the end again: be careful! Let us come to the statement—[*Interruption.*] Angus, you'll find the door, I think, in a minute.

Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

12.33 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will begin by responding to your helpful statement yesterday.

The Foreign Secretary, the business managers and I all believe it is essential that this House properly scrutinises the work of the Foreign Office, especially as we face such a daunting set of challenges across the world. As Minister of State, I will follow the precedent set by successive Governments of different parties, from the days of Lord Home and Lord Carrington to more recent times when Lord Mandelson served in the Cabinet from the House of Lords. I will deputise for the Foreign Secretary in this House, making regular statements like today's and respecting the primacy of this House in the normal way; and, of course, the Foreign Secretary will appear before the House of Lords and relevant Committees regularly.

The terrible events in Israel and Gaza have underlined the critical importance of British diplomacy and development work. As Israel battles to defeat Hamas, the humanitarian situation remains extremely difficult. As the Prime Minister said last night, Israel must respect international humanitarian law.

With services and communication in Gaza under unprecedented strain, it is difficult to be absolutely certain about how events are unfolding, but the reports we have had from partners make clear the appalling loss of life, including among children and aid workers, and the situation in hospitals in Gaza City, notably Al-Shifa, is now acute. Al-Shifa has hundreds of in-patients and was able to offer a set of services unavailable elsewhere in Gaza. Reports indicate that operations have stopped due to the lack of fuel and supplies, and that premature babies have died due to the lack of electricity. Fuel is urgently needed to power hospitals as well as desalination plants to ensure access to clean water. Hospitals should be places of safety, able to treat patients with compassion. It is distressing to see them unable to do so. Every civilian death is heartbreaking, and it is impossible to comprehend the pain and loss that innocent Palestinians are enduring.

As the House knows, since 7 October the Government have been engaging intensively with our close allies and partners in the region. Since my last update to the House, I have met—in Birmingham on Sunday—representatives of Islamic Relief, who still have humanitarian supplies in Gaza, to hear clearly from them about the situation on the ground, and this morning I spoke to Martin Griffiths, the head of the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs. I will travel to the region overnight tonight. The new Foreign Secretary has discussed the situation with US Secretary of State Tony Blinken. The Government will be able to draw on his extensive regional experience in the weeks and months ahead.

Our goals remain unchanged. As I told the House last week, we are focused on getting life-saving aid to those in need in Gaza; supporting the safe return of hostages and British nationals; backing Israel's right to self-defence; and preventing a dangerous regional escalation.

Our efforts have contributed to some delivery of aid via the Rafah crossing and to over 150 British nationals being able to leave Gaza safely. Since I spoke to the House last week, more British nationals and their families have left, and we will continue to offer all the support we can to those British nationals still in Gaza, so that they too can cross into Egypt.

As the House knows, we have more than doubled our aid to civilians in Gaza, committing £30 million, and we stand ready to do more. For over a week, British flights carrying aid have been landing in Egypt, with shipments including life-saving items as well as the vital equipment that the Egyptian Red Crescent needs to be able to manage donations from across the world effectively. We are also urging the Israeli Government to increase humanitarian access, including through Rafah and by opening up the Kerem Shalom crossing. At this point we assess that land presently offers the most viable and safe way to get humanitarian aid into Gaza in the quantities needed, but we are also considering air and maritime options, including through our bases in Cyprus.

The Government have been clear that all parties to a conflict must afford civilians the protection that is their right under international law. That includes respecting the sanctity of hospitals, so that doctors can continue to care for the sick and injured. Events on 7 October and Hamas's subsequent statements have made it clear that they are a terrorist group who pose an existential threat to the very idea of an Israeli state. Israel has a right to defend itself against this terrorist threat, to restore its security and to bring the hostages home, but there are things that Israel must do as part of its response. We have impressed this on the Israeli Government: they must act within international law; they must take every precaution to minimise civilian casualties, limiting attacks to military targets; and they must stop extremist settler violence in the west bank. At the same time, we should be under no illusions. Hamas have chosen to embed themselves within the civilian population, and their willingness to sacrifice innocent Palestinians in this way only brings home their inhumanity.

Alleviating the suffering is our foremost priority. We welcome any initiatives that would allow more aid to be delivered and hostages to be released. We have therefore consistently called for humanitarian pauses. Four-hour pauses in northern Gaza are an important first step, but longer pauses that cover wider areas will be needed. We are discussing with the UN and other partners how best to achieve this. We must avoid measures that serve only to benefit Hamas and allow them to entrench their position. At the same time, we need all parties to the conflict to abide by any pause, allowing sufficient time and security for civilians to move and for aid to be delivered.

Responding to the immediate crisis is critical, but we also need to do more to create a new political horizon. The whole House knows that only one answer has come close to creating peace in these troubled lands: a two-state solution.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

12.40 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

I would have liked to have started by welcoming the new Foreign Secretary to his place, but I cannot do so because he is not here. Despite my respect for the Minister, he is not the Foreign Secretary. We do not know when or how this House will hear from the Foreign Secretary because he is not a Member. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Seely, are you going to be quiet?

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Yes.

Mr Speaker: Right—in which case, the shadow Foreign Secretary may continue.

Mr Lammy: David Cameron is the seventh Foreign Secretary in seven years of Tory chaos. He was forced to resign in failure over a matter of foreign policy. The Prime Minister has looked at each of the 350 Conservative Members and decided that none of them would be better at representing Britain's interests on the world stage. The Prime Minister claims he is for change, but instead he has resurrected yesterday's failure with an honour. That decision raises serious questions for this House, but I know you share those concerns, Mr Speaker.

At a time of grave international crisis and at a moment of war in Europe, with a more assertive China, a climate emergency and a horrifying conflict in Gaza, this House needs Government accountability more than ever. Will the Minister commit to working closely with Mr Speaker to ensure that the Opposition and all Members of Parliament can hold the Foreign Secretary to account?

I turn to the horrors of Gaza. More than 11,000 Palestinians have reportedly been killed, with two thirds of the dead being women and children. This is shocking and devastating. Every civilian death is an equal tragedy. Does the Minister agree that the number of Palestinian civilians and children who have been killed over the past month is intolerable? And does he agree that Israel must make changes to how it is fighting this war, by taking urgent and concrete steps to protect civilian life?

I am gravely concerned by the desperate reports from hospitals in northern Gaza. These hospitals were already overstretched with the wounded, short of fuel and filled with civilians seeking shelter. Doctors are now forced to make impossible choices as they try to care for the wounded and newborns, without power. Some of those newborns have now lost their lives—unbearable.

Medical establishments have special protection under international law. They should never be targeted or used as shields. All parties must follow international law, acting with necessity, distinction, proportionality and precaution. Allegations of breaches should always be treated with the utmost seriousness.

The Minister said last week that the Government support the independence of the International Criminal Court, as does the Labour party, but he failed to answer whether the Government recognise its jurisdiction to address the conduct of all parties in Gaza. As Prime Minister, Boris Johnson rejected that jurisdiction and attacked the court. Labour recognises the ICC's jurisdiction. Can the Minister clarify his Government's position today?

Gaza is in a humanitarian catastrophe. More than 1.5 million people have been displaced, and there are desperate shortages of basic essentials. Does the Minister agree that the short pauses in the north are clearly not enough? Gazans need aid now. They need medicine now. They need water now. They need food now. They need fuel now. A full, comprehensive and immediate humanitarian pause in fighting across the whole of Gaza is needed now to alleviate Palestinian suffering and in order for Hamas terrorists to release the hostages.

Hamas's stated aim is to wipe Israel off the map. They committed the most brutal attack on Jews since the holocaust and now they are using innocent Palestinians as human shields. I would like to register my shock that not every Member of this House can say this truth: Hamas are terrorists.

We must not give up on the narrow openings that keep the prospect of peace alive. That means preventing escalation, condemning violence from settlers in the west bank, condemning rocket attacks on Israel from Iran's proxies in Lebanon and elsewhere, and creating a future where Gaza is not subject to occupation. Meanwhile, international diplomacy evolves and the facts on the ground are changing day to day, in relation to both hostages being rescued and Hamas's capability to carry out attacks such as we saw on 7 October. As the Leader of the Opposition set out to Chatham House, we must move to a full

“cessation of fighting as quickly as possible...the reality is that neither the long-term security of Israel nor long-term justice for Palestine can be delivered by bombs and bullets.”

We must seek a path to a political process that leads to two states, a secure Israel and an independent Palestine.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and perhaps I should start by addressing those about the Foreign Secretary. Having a former Prime Minister and party leader as our Foreign Secretary, wherever one sits in this House, must be a plus. They will be able to exert British influence and policy highly effectively overseas, and I greatly welcome the appointment of Lord Cameron to the position of Foreign Secretary. As the House will know, he is an extremely experienced parliamentarian, and I have no doubt whatsoever that the House, the Foreign Office and the Government will gain enormously from his presence.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me whether I will commit to working closely with you, Mr Speaker, and of course there is only one answer to that question.

Mr Speaker: That wasn't much reassurance, was it? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Mitchell: In addition, I will seek to ensure the fullest possible accountability, as you set it out, Mr Speaker.

The right hon. Gentleman speaks of the scale of death and misery. All deaths of civilians are to be profoundly regretted. He talked about the scenes from the Al-Shifa Hospital, which will have shocked every Member of this House. He, like me, will be aware that 102 humanitarian workers, who placed their lives in jeopardy to support their fellow human beings, have lost their lives. He asks me about the ICC. It is not for me to fetter or speak in the place of its chief prosecutor, but the right hon. Gentleman will know that he has spoken and will do so again.

[Mr Mitchell]

The right hon. Gentleman called for the hostages to be released, and I hope that everyone in this House will echo that. He said that Hamas are terrorists and suggested that some do not recognise that. I agree with him and hope that every Member of the House will make it clear that Hamas are terrorists. A dreadful pogrom took place on 7 October, where more Jewish people lost their lives in a day than at any time since the holocaust, and that piece of information is fundamental to our appreciation of the events to which he referred.

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

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): As of today, I am informed that no more aid will reach Gaza, not because it cannot get to the Rafah crossing or because it is piling up in Egypt, but because the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees has no fuel left and so the aid cannot be redistributed. So although I really appreciate the Government looking at maritime and air efforts, and, crucially, at the need to open a second aid crossing to the west bank, there is no point—it is futile—unless we get the fuel to the UN. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me as to what is being done to change that situation? Secondly, has the Foreign Office's overseas judicial assistance assessment increased since 7 October—yes or no?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend asks me about the position on fuel. Fuel is desperately needed today—it is going to run out. The United Nations has been accessing dirty fuel, but now that is at an end and we are incredibly worried about the situation. We are talking to the key American humanitarian intervenor, Mr Satterfield, about this. We are working diplomatically to do everything we can to make sure that the position on fuel is addressed, as we have been doing since I last updated the House.

I did not catch the first part of my hon. Friend's final question, so I will write to her on that point.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Minister of State for prior sight of his statement, but here we are on day one of the new FCDO regime and already we see the absurdity of having a Foreign Secretary who is unable to come to speak in this Chamber to elected Members at a time of grave international crisis.

The Minister is right to highlight the appalling loss of life in Gaza, particularly among children and aid workers. Sadly, there is little sign of that ending soon as the bombardment intensifies. He is also right to say that a humanitarian crisis is unfolding.

A couple of weeks ago, I asked the previous Secretary of State whether he had been made aware, or had reasonable grounds to believe, that Israel had breached international humanitarian law in its response to the atrocities of 7 October. He steadfastly refused to answer that question, so I ask the Minister the same question. If he has, what representations has he made to the Israeli Government and what response has he had?

There can only be a political solution to this crisis, and one has to be found before the entire region is engulfed. That is why a ceasefire is essential: to end the unprecedented levels of killing and destruction, allow full humanitarian access, secure the release of the hostages and find a political solution that does not include Hamas. Four-hour pauses are not the answer. Can we expect the new Foreign Secretary to change tack and support our calls for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, so that there is space for that political solution to be found?

Tomorrow, the House should have an opportunity to show its support for a ceasefire. I and every one of my SNP colleagues will be there to support an immediate ceasefire, and I would expect Labour party Members from Scotland to be in the Lobby with us. Without justice, there can be no peace, this horrific cycle of violence will continue and more Israeli and Palestinian lives will be lost.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman underlines the loss of life and the causes of it. He knows our position on a ceasefire—it is a position shared by Members on the Opposition Front Bench—and he also knows the absolute commitment we have to try to drive forward pauses. They must be safe pauses for the delivery of humanitarian relief, but he knows of our commitment on that.

The hon. Gentleman asks me about humanitarian law. Robert Mardini, the director general of the International Committee of the Red Cross, has made clear that Gaza hospitals, treating hundreds of wounded people, cannot be targeted under any circumstances. The hon. Gentleman will know that the ICRC is the guardian of international humanitarian law and the Geneva convention, and Robert Mardini has said:

“Hospitals are to be absolutely protected at all times.”

Finally, the hon. Gentleman makes a point about a political solution. I draw his attention to my final comments in my statement, about how we have to focus on that and on the two-state solution, and about the need for hope and opportunity to drive forward the politics in this dreadful situation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I expect to allow questions on the statement to run for about an hour, but because there are so many of the same Members wishing to speak in the debate on the King's Speech, I hope we can have short questions and speedy answers.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has said, following the unprovoked slaughter of its citizens, Israel has a right to pursue and destroy the terrorist forces. It is terrible that the ordinary citizens of Gaza are paying the price for this, as Hamas would have known, but even if Israel is able to degrade and destroy the Hamas forces, the Hamas mindset will remain—a Hamas mindset that is funded and supported by Iran. Iran does not want there to be peace between Arab states and Israel because the Iranian regime does not want Israel to exist. When will the Government take firmer measures? Members from across the House have asked when the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, for example, will be proscribed and we have never been given a good reason why it is not. What is the answer?

Mr Mitchell: I hear what he says about the IRGC, and I know that he has already been in contact with the Foreign Secretary on exactly that point. I hope he will accept that we do not carry on a running commentary on issues such as proscription, but the House and the Foreign Secretary have heard what he said.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am still not clear whether the right hon. Gentleman agrees with Labour that the ICC has jurisdiction over the conduct of all parties in Gaza. If he does, then that is a very welcome change from the position of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Will he clarify that?

Mr Mitchell: I repeat what I said last week. It is not for Ministers to seek to state where the ICC has jurisdiction; that is for the chief prosecutor. The chief prosecutor has not been silent on this matter, and I am sure he will continue to express his views.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Whether we like it or not, Israel will carry on fighting until it has established control of the area from which it was attacked. The question that then arises is what happens next. If Israel simply withdraws, Hamas will reappear. At least one moderate Arab state believes that a two-state solution will have to be imposed and policed. Are the Government giving thought as to who might carry out that job? Otherwise, the outcome that they want—a two-state solution—is wholly impracticable.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is entirely right about that, and entirely right that Israel has an absolute right of self-defence in this matter. On the options to which he alludes, I can assure him that a great deal of thought is going on, not only in Britain but across the region and elsewhere.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): A lasting peace and a two-state solution is the only way to guarantee dignity and security for both Palestinians and Israelis. Hamas, a terrorist organisation, cannot be part of that, but a month after their contemptable attack on Israel, it is clear that a military solution is not working. It is not removing Hamas, and instead we have the humanitarian catastrophe to which the Minister referred. Does he agree that the way to achieve that peace and a two-state solution is to back a political solution with an immediate bilateral ceasefire, explicitly contingent on both parties adhering to it, so that if one party breaks the ceasefire, a military operation remains on the table?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is entirely right about the importance of a political solution. She knows the position of the Government and Members on the Opposition Front Bench on the issue of ceasefires, but I hope she will draw some comfort from the emphasis on extended pauses that we are now seeing. On the politics, I remind her that the great progress that was made at Oslo, which brought things so tantalisingly close, took place on the back of the first intifada.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Every right thinking person wants to see an end to fighting and a durable peace for Palestinians and Israelis, but Hamas have made absolutely clear that there will be no such peace so long as the state of Israel continues to

exist. Will my right hon. Friend say a bit more about what has been happening at the Al-Shifa Hospital and other hospitals in Gaza? Has he seen the reports and the footage circulating of Hamas fighters using those hospitals as bases for operations, putting civilians' lives at risk?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about these matters, is correct. Hamas have made clear that they do not seek a ceasefire and indeed seek to repeat the awful events of 7 October. As far as the Al-Shifa Hospital is concerned, he, like me, will have seen the horrific pictures on television last night, and I referred specifically to the awful effects on babies that were displayed.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Recently, several United Nations experts gave a dire warning to the world, stating they believed that “the Palestinian people are at grave risk of genocide”, and that the time is now “running out” to prevent such a tragedy. Furthermore, they made it clear that Israel's allies share the responsibility for that and must act now to prevent a genocide from taking place. Given those warnings, will the Minister finally stand with 76% of the British public and call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: We will continue to focus on the importance of humanitarian pauses, but also try to make sure that, when the opportunity of a pause presents itself, we are able to get critical humanitarian supplies to those in desperate need.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Away from the horror of Israel and Gaza, there is an unfolding tragedy on the west bank, with the killing of well over 100, getting on for 200, Palestinians by settlers and the Israel Defence Forces. In his statement, my right hon. Friend rightly urged Israel to provide protection from them. If the state of Israel declines to do so and the killings continue, would he consider the intervention of a UN peacekeeping force to keep the peace in that part of the world?

Mr Mitchell: We have condemned the settler violence without qualification. On the work of the United Nations, there will be many opportunities in the future, I hope, and we will neglect none of them.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I share what the Minister has said about the humanitarian tragedy that we are witnessing all the time on our televisions. We must try to unlock a process towards peace, and the issue of the hostages is key to that. What steps has he taken so far and what further steps will be taken by the new Foreign Secretary to ensure that the hostages are brought home? I really believe that that could unlock the route to peace.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. She has spoken movingly and with great expertise and humanity about this situation both on the media and in the House. If she will forgive me, we cannot give a running commentary on what we are doing to try to recover the hostages. I hope that she will accept my word that we are doing everything, across Government and internationally, to try to get them home as soon as we can.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The director of the FBI has said that Hamas pose the greatest security risk to the United States and the west since ISIS a decade ago. Does the Minister of State agree with that assessment, and what are the Government doing to work with our international partners to reduce that threat both in the region and here at home?

Mr Mitchell: The threat of Hamas, which my right hon. Friend sets out very clearly, is undoubtedly true. It is part of Israel's legitimate position that it can exercise its right to self-defence and go after the dreadful terrorists who perpetrated that awful act.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Thousands of innocent men, women and children have been killed and thousands more wounded in this conflict over the past month. As the ground operation and bombing campaign intensifies, as encircled hospitals run out of power and medicine, as babies are left to die outside their incubators, and as more than 2 million Palestinians remain trapped in a never-ending humanitarian nightmare, does the Minister agree that the international community must protect civilians? If he does, why will the Government not join me in pressing for an immediate ceasefire to end the bloodshed, allow desperately needed aid to reach those most in need, and create space for meaningful negotiations and a peaceful resolution?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman speaks with great passion and eloquence on this matter in the House. I can do no better than repeat what the Prime Minister said last night in his speech at Mansion House. He said that Israel

“must take all possible measures to protect innocent civilians, including at hospitals”.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): My right hon. Friend and his shadow have spoken of hospitals. I have to tell him that there is now video evidence of suicide vests, rocket-propelled grenades, motorcycles used to kidnap Israelis to Gaza, nappies, and chairs with rope to hold hostages being found in the basement of the Al-Rantisi Hospital in Gaza. The hospital was obviously used by Hamas as a command centre and is believed to have held Israeli hostages. Does my right hon. Friend agree that using hospitals in this way as places to imprison hostages and keep weapons is an outrageous breach of international law?

Mr Mitchell: Yes.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Gaza was facing a humanitarian crisis before 7 October. The Government cut funding to UNRWA from £50 million to £10 million. The clock is ticking. Hospitals are running out of fuel, food and water supplies are almost depleted, and until a large-scale humanitarian operation is in place, many more people will needlessly die. Will the Minister update us on what progress the Government have made to secure a humanitarian resolution through the UN Security Council?

Mr Mitchell: We are working night and day for humanitarian access. On the subject of support for UNRWA, we increased aid very substantially, as the

hon. Lady knows, before 7 October. Since then, we have allocated £30 million of humanitarian aid and we will do more if it is required.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Several hundred of my constituents have written to me deeply concerned about the loss of civilian life and wanting the fighting to stop, which we all want. Last week, my right hon. Friend called for Israel to take measures to protect civilians. I said that we needed to see Israel take such measures, but civilians have continued to die, especially in hospitals. Please can he double down on that request to Israel to take measures to protect civilians?

Mr Speaker, if I may, in the meantime in Sudan—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have asked everybody to be brief so that other people can get in. We should not be driven by self-centred behaviour.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend makes a most important humanitarian point and she may rest assured that the Government are seized of it.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): France's President Macron has called for a ceasefire, joining other European nations such as Spain, Norway, Portugal and Ireland, as well as the UN Secretary-General. Securing a negotiated ceasefire—one that is binding on all sides—will require a huge diplomatic effort, so is it not time for our Government to add their weight to the push for a ceasefire, rather than dismissing out of hand a proposal that has growing international support?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member will know that, in order to have a ceasefire, we need both parties to agree to it. Hamas have made it absolutely clear that they are not interested in a ceasefire. They made it clear that they want to repeat the actions of 7 October. I believe the right position is to press for pauses. That is the position of the Government and of the official Opposition.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I understand that just four Conservative Members have visited Israel since 7 October: the Prime Minister, the former Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) and me. Last week, when I was there, I did see evidence of humanitarian protection by the IDF forces. I also saw videos and photographs of the things that happened in some of the kibbutzim, and they were, quite simply, crimes against humanity. Does the Minister agree that there is no moral equivalence between Hamas and the sovereign independent state of Israel?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, I completely agree with what my hon. Friend has said. He should know that the Prime Minister and other members of the Government have been in continuous contact with Prime Minister Netanyahu, including by holding frequent conversations and discussions. However, I have to say that it would be helpful if all those calling for Israel to protect hospitals would also call on Hamas to vacate the hospitals and stop using civilians as human shields.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Today, Alon-Lee Green, the director of Standing Together, the largest cross-community organisation in Israel, posted a video of a soldier in Gaza saying:

“I’m on the beach in Gaza, in Gush Katif. I’m safe. I’m happy. Me and my friends conquered Beit Lahia, Al Atatra and Sulatin and we’re moving on and we’re gonna conquer the rest of Gaza. I’m safe. I’m happy. I’m enjoying the big opportunity of my lifetime. I love you all and I couldn’t be happier to be where I am—doing God’s work.”

Alon-Lee Green said:

“What’s going on in Gaza does not only go against the Palestinian interest, it goes also against my peoples’ interest, the Jewish Israeli interest.”

Also today, we had Danny Danon, a Likud member and former ambassador, and Ram Ben Barak, a Yesh Atid opposition member, say that Israel should expel all Palestinians from Gaza. What are we doing to restrain the Israeli Government and commentators?

Mr Mitchell: We have always made it clear to Israel that we are its closest possible friend, but friends give candid advice and do not always say what people want to hear. The British Government will continue—with, I believe, the strong support of this House—to make the right points to the Israeli Government, and we are able to do so because of our extremely close alliance and friendship with them.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The human misery and death on both sides, Israeli and Palestinian, are the worst I have witnessed since I became a Member of this House, and they will be solved only by a long-term political solution. Will my right hon. Friend, with whom I totally agree, explain what the British Government are doing in strategic planning to bring about a two-state solution?

Mr Mitchell: There is an immense amount of work going on about how we get to the point where we can achieve that. As I set out in my statement, there is no alternative to the two-state solution, and all interested parties should get behind that.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I had a dreadful 40-hour labour when giving birth to my first child, but I still consider myself lucky: I had medicine, water, electricity and a functioning hospital. The 180 women giving birth in Gaza do not have those things. There is a report of a pregnant Palestinian woman who had horrific injuries from shelling and who then had an emergency C-section performed without electricity. I know the Minister will think that that is unacceptable, but what is he actually doing to ensure that hospitals and pregnant women are protected by international law?

Mr Mitchell: We are speaking out in every way we can to try to protect vulnerable citizens. I quote what President Joe Biden said yesterday in an Oval Office address. He said that Al-Shifa Hospital “must be protected” and that

“it is my...expectation that there will be less intrusive action”.

Israel has made it clear that it has clashed with Hamas nearby, but has not fired on the hospitals themselves.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): First, I thank the FCDO for helping to rescue a group of Isle of Wight pilgrims who were caught in the Holy Land at the beginning of this dreadful conflict. Secondly—it is a genuine question—both sides have talked about the importance of protecting hospitals, but what can Israel

do when those hospitals are being used to store ammunition and hold hostages, when there are military HQs and operational Hamas commands underneath those hospitals, and when Hamas are deliberately denying those hospitals fuel, because they would rather broadcast pictures of very tiny babies dying than try to save them?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend speaks with great eloquence and passion on this point. I can do no better than to commend the eloquence of his argument.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The short pauses on their own are a first step, but they will not address the grave humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza. The damage to water pipelines, sewage pipes, hospitals, schools and other infrastructure requires urgent rebuilding, and that will require a much longer negotiated ceasefire from both sides and the release of all hostages. Does the Minister agree that the aid getting into Gaza is woefully inadequate and that it is simply unacceptable for Israel not to lift its atrocious blockade and siege of Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right that getting aid into Gaza is an absolute top priority. That is why we are focusing on opening up not only Rafah, but Kerem Shalom, and trying to make sure that we build up stores so that, when we can get it in, we are able to bring support to desperate people.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the statement by the Minister and the fact that the Government are looking at and working with international partners on humanitarian pauses and increasing humanitarian aid.

The Minister has said that the Government welcome any new initiatives for a way forward. May I suggest two? The United Kingdom hosted the Friends of Syria international donors’ conference in London, with international partners. Can the United Kingdom look at doing that for Palestine and Gaza? Linked to that, with regard to what happens in Gaza after Hamas is defeated, we have talked about the Palestinian Authority stepping up, but we have not talked about the other scenario. The United Kingdom chairs the Trusteeship Council at the UN, along with France, which looks at transitional arrangements. Will the Government consider that as a way forward?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Colleagues have to understand that Mr Speaker has said very clearly that the statement will end at 2 o’clock. It is up to colleagues whether they choose to allow other colleagues to get in. We must have shorter questions, please.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend has made a further two thoughtful interventions. The Government will consider every possible way ahead as soon as the opportunity presents itself.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): There is no point in bragging about awarding £30 million of aid if it cannot get in to help the civilians in Gaza. Since 7 October, only 900 aid trucks have been allowed in. In normal circumstances, the number would be close to 20,000. With fuel running out, is this not now collective punishment? It is clear that, as the Minister says, a four-hour pause is not long enough. If he will not call

[Alan Brown]

for an immediate ceasefire, what length of pause in fighting does he think is required to get aid in to Gaza to help civilians?

Mr Mitchell: It is not just a humanitarian pause that is the issue, but how to distribute vital humanitarian supplies safely to people who may be being corralled in small spaces. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, as the opportunity presents itself, we will do everything we can to drive forward those pauses and to make them as effective as possible.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): UNRWA has announced that it will be unable to collect aid imported from Egypt today because it does not have the fuel for trucks. That also means that water pumping, sewage treatment and other essential services will cease. Has my right hon. Friend had discussions with the Israelis about the plan to get the aid around Gaza and about their exit strategy?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that fuel is the most important of many important issues today. We continue to lobby and argue with all relevant parties for the importance of allowing vital fuel for life-saving purposes into Gaza.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): The Minister alluded to the horrific scenes at the weekend of babies dying because they cannot be in incubators. The IDF has offered incubators to the hospital, but it is not incubators that the hospital needs. It has incubators; it needs fuel. The UN has offered to courier that fuel in for the incubators, but the Israeli Government are not allowing that. Can I urge the Minister to do everything he can to change that?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will know that Israel did offer fuel yesterday, but Hamas did not allow it to be accepted.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I congratulate Lord Cameron on his appointment as Foreign Secretary. I know that he will be well respected in foreign capitals. However, as Mr Speaker said yesterday, there is a scrutiny problem for this House of Commons. Many of my constituents care deeply about the Israel-Palestine situation and other issues, such as the ongoing negotiations on the future of the British Indian Ocean Territory. Therefore, in order to enhance Commons scrutiny, will the Foreign Office commit to the Secretary of State's coming before the Foreign Affairs Committee on the same regular cycle that the Foreign Secretary would have appeared at the Dispatch Box for FCDO questions?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We are committed to ensuring that this House can fully scrutinise everything that the Foreign Office does, and his suggestion about a similar pattern of appearances for the Foreign Secretary before the Foreign Affairs Committee is a good one.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Minister will be aware that President Macron, the United Nations and all the adjoining Arab countries

are calling for a ceasefire. They are calling for a ceasefire because short humanitarian pauses will not end the slaughter. Does he accept that what the British people and supporters of parties on all sides of the House want to see is policies that will end the killing, end the slaughter and move towards the negotiated settlement that we will have to move to in any case?

Mr Mitchell: We all want to see the focus back on the political solution, which the right hon. Lady ended her comments by extolling. I draw her attention to the telling arguments that have been made—and not just by the Government but by those on her own Front Bench—about why the humanitarian pauses, rather than a ceasefire, are the right approach.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that the House welcomes the extra support that has gone to Gazan civilians, but he will also have noted today that there would be support for further aid to get there quickly. He will know that that aid can only get there, and we can only make sure it gets to the people who need it rather than to Hamas, if those humanitarian pauses are longer than four hours. Can he say what progress is being made? I have listened carefully to what he says, but can he say when he expects success for longer humanitarian pauses?

Mr Mitchell: I am afraid that I cannot give my hon. Friend a timescale of the sort that we would all like to see, but we are aware that to achieve a humanitarian pause is the start of progress, and nothing will deter us from advocating for that on all occasions.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Minister referred in his statement to the appalling loss of life among children, and I was pleased that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) pressed him on that specifically because so many of my constituents are concerned about it. As things stand, will that appalling loss of life not simply carry on? What are the Government doing to bring it to some kind of conclusion?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman is right. In north Gaza, all hospitals but one are out of service owing to a lack of power or damage. We are acutely aware of the strain and stress on life. That is why, as I set out in my statement and have argued in some of my responses to questions from across the House, we are doing everything we can to advance respect for international humanitarian law and to bring this dreadful conflict to a close.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement, his acknowledgment that there is a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and all his efforts to get aid into Gaza. A few moments ago, in answer to a previous question, he acknowledged that the US President said he hopes to see “less intrusive action” at the Al-Shifa Hospital, as patients and staff remain trapped inside, and that hospitals “must be protected”. For clarity, is that also the position of the UK Government?

Mr Mitchell: Yes. We are extremely concerned that everything should be done to protect life, in the way that the President of the United States set out.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The Archbishop of Canterbury and the French President are the latest leaders to call for a ceasefire, joining the heads of several UN bodies, millions of British people, 120 nations and many Members of this House. More than 11,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed, of whom nearly half were children. That cannot be just. I cannot in all conscience call for anything less than an end to this suffering. Will the Minister pluck up some courage and call for an immediate ceasefire in order to end the humanitarian disaster in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman and I share the common aim of ending the suffering—there is nothing between us on that. The argument is about how best to achieve it. That is why the Opposition Front Benchers and the Government have determined that trying to promote humanitarian pauses is the right way to proceed.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): Although nobody wants to see the conflict continue, does the Minister agree that those who call for an immediate ceasefire must initially acknowledge that Hamas are a terrorist organisation, that they started the conflict through their horrific attack on 7 October, and that terrorist organisations agree to ceasefires only when it suits their military aims, rather than for genuine humanitarian reasons?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is wise in pointing out the reasons why the combatants are not seeking to achieve a ceasefire at this time.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): UNRWA has announced that it is no longer able to collect aid because it no longer has any fuel for its trucks. We know that half of the hospitals in Gaza are already closed owing to a lack of fuel and security. That is why I and many others believe that a ceasefire is vital to ensure that humanitarian aid, including fuel, can get into Gaza. What discussions is the Minister having with the Israeli authorities to ensure that healthcare, aid and fuel can get into Gaza? He talked about extended; how long would an extended pause be?

Mr Mitchell: In respect of the hon. Lady's final comment, that is what we are seeking to negotiate. Every sinew of the British Government is bent towards achieving the humanitarian aims that she sets out. I can tell her that, as of the time I came to make this statement, the Al-Ahli Hospital remains the only functioning hospital in Gaza, but it does not have a blood bank or supplies, so the situation is every bit as desperate as she and others on both sides of the House have set out.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): In addition to the evidence that we have already heard of Hamas stockpiling weapons and the apparatus of terror in hospitals, including children's hospitals, the Israeli authorities have also identified the misappropriation of aid, such as oxygen concentrators—meant to aerate the tunnels operated by Hamas—being hidden in aid trucks. Is that not all evidence that no matter how much our human instincts want to see an end to bloodshed and the loss of life, a ceasefire would only embolden the terrorists, embolden Hamas, and the only way to get peace in the middle east is for the total destruction of Hamas?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right: the military power of Hamas has to be destroyed. That is what many people believe, and that is what the Israeli Government are intent on doing. I point out to him that the Israel Defence Forces use their power to defend their citizens; Hamas use their citizens to defend Hamas.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister has rightly pointed out the intolerable human suffering of civilians in Gaza, but does he accept that it is a consequence of the blatant abuse of civilians by Hamas, who have bombed hospitals and used them as bases, denied vital aid, and located arms factories in flats where people are living? As the terrorists are clearly under pressure—they are losing commanders, bases and control—does he agree that now is the wrong time to call for a ceasefire, which would only allow the terrorists to regroup, re-arm and prolong the conflict?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman speaks with authority and understanding of these situations. He eloquently explains why a ceasefire is not a practical opportunity.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister rightly said in his statement:

“Hospitals should be places of safety, able to treat patients with compassion. It is distressing to see them unable to do so.” Médecins Sans Frontières has demanded, as a bare minimum, a medical evacuation of patients. What more can the British Government do to make that happen?

Mr Mitchell: As I have set out throughout my responses and in my statement, the British Government are doing everything we possibly can to advance that humanitarian endeavour.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Clearly, the atrocities of Hamas will in time be considered a war crime, but what we are seeing from the IDF at the moment is so far removed from what can be described as “self-defence”. Israeli Government officials have called Gazans “human animals” and referenced the use of nuclear weapons on Gaza. Netanyahu himself has cited Amalek in the Book of Samuel, which mentions killing and slaughtering every child, animal and person. On top of that, Israeli Ministers have handed out machine guns to people in the west bank. I have not heard a moral case—let alone a logical case—from anybody in this House for not joining all the Arab world, the UN, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope in calling for an immediate ceasefire in order to get hostages out and humanitarian aid in.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will have heard the arguments for and against a ceasefire, and he will have heard what the Government and his own Front Benchers have said. That is where the argument rests.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): At the last FCDO questions, I asked the Minister twice about getting fuel through to hospitals, and highlighted in particular the plight of women due to give birth in appalling circumstances. Their babies are now dying. I appreciate what he says about trying to do everything we can to get fuel through to hospitals, but at what point do we say, “Enough is enough; Israel will not allow that to happen”, and what can we do to ensure that those babies' lives are saved?

Mr Mitchell: It is important not to give up hope. It is important to drive forward in every possible way we can the objectives that the hon. Lady and I share, and we will continue to do that.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): As the Minister acknowledged, we were all shocked by the images of babies being huddled together in the hope of keeping them warm enough to stay alive. What more will the Government do to overcome the problems that the Minister referred to in response to my hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), to ensure that we facilitate the safe delivery of fuel for humanitarian purposes such as keeping life-saving equipment working for people in hospitals in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: The central way to address that point is to try to get fuel through, and that is what we are doing.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): Many of my constituents want to see hon. Members in this place, including those on the Labour and Tory Benches, calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. With one in 200 local Gazan people killed by the Israeli war machine, how much worse does it have to get before this place prioritises life over death and peace over war? The Minister says that Hamas may not want a ceasefire, so why do what Hamas wish? The Government must not wait for more people to die before eventually listening to the public, my constituents and President Macron and making that ceasefire happen.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member will have heard heavily rehearsed during this statement the arguments for and against a ceasefire, and I fear I cannot add anything to what I have already said on that point.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister's call for Israel to follow international law in Gaza rings utterly hollow when we know that that is not happening. The United Nations Secretary-General, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others have been clear that Israel is clearly and grossly violating international humanitarian law. Since 2015, this Government have licensed more than £472 million of arms exports to Israel, including parts of F-35 stealth aircraft, which are currently raining down bombs on Gaza. Does the Minister know whether British weapons have been used in violations of international law in Gaza, and does he agree that we should not sell weapons for committing war crimes?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member will know that the President of Israel, President Herzog, has made it clear that his country will abide by international humanitarian law. *[Interruption.]* She will also know that, in respect of arms exports in this country, we have the toughest arms regulations anywhere in the world.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the number of Palestinian civilian deaths that there will be, including babies and children, without a humanitarian ceasefire in the next month?

Mr Mitchell: I would not necessarily trust the figures that are produced by Hamas, but we do know that an extraordinary number of people have lost their lives,

and we are all trying to do everything we can to make sure that we bring this situation to a conclusion as rapidly as possible.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Before we talk about humanitarian pauses, should we not agree first what we want to achieve by them? Would they not need to be for days or weeks, not just for four hours? We need to repair infrastructure and get aid in on a scale that is just not possible while hostilities continue. Do the Government not need to call for an immediate cessation of hostilities—a ceasefire—during the period that is agreed, to get humanitarian aid in at the volume that is required?

Mr Mitchell: It is not just a question of using the pauses to try to advance humanitarian good; it is also about trying to use the humanitarian pauses to achieve some of the things the hon. Member said. As I said earlier, we have to be incredibly careful that we do not end up creating a false sense of security, as the House will remember happened in Srebrenica, northern Iraq and Rwanda.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and all he is doing to alleviate suffering in the region. The human cost in Israel and Gaza is truly immense and heartbreaking. Will he join me in commending the extraordinary bravery of the aid workers on the ground in Gaza, some of whom have tragically lost their lives, including over 100 UN workers?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is entirely right. I hope a particularly hot place in hell is reserved for those who murder humanitarian workers who have put themselves in harm's way unarmed purely to protect the lives and interests of their fellow humanity.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): We have heard this afternoon that, frankly, this short pause is not working—four hours will not achieve anything. The fact that we are seeing Palestinians being forced to leave their homes en masse is quite worrying. Will the Minister condemn the acts of violence and extremism by Israeli settlers in the west bank, call on Israeli authorities to prevent that settler violence, ensure that there is clear accountability for the perpetrators and condemn this extremist rhetoric?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member will have heard what the Prime Minister and other members of the Government have said in condemning settler violence. We will continue to stand up for the rule of law and international humanitarian law on every occasion we are able to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Gregory Campbell. *[Interruption.]*

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am not Gregory Campbell, but I am happy to ask a question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thought he was behind you. All right; I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his replies, which are positive, and I know he means well. Can he provide an update on

what progress has been made on discussions with Jordan, Egypt and surrounding nations to secure the free passage of medical aid? Will that be considered as a priority?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. Discussions are going on with Jordan and Egypt on that very point, and I will go tonight to Egypt to try to further those discussions.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): In setting out what a humanitarian pause would involve, the Secretary of State is setting out the challenge at the heart of this. Those of us who believe that we should be working alongside our international colleagues for an urgent ceasefire as the best way to end the Palestinian bloodshed and the horrors we are seeing in Gaza know that any ceasefire that does not involve the immediate return of hostages and the dismantling of Hamas is unlikely to be sustainable. The Minister talked about the conversations the new Foreign Secretary has had with the Secretary of State in America. The Foreign Secretary cannot be in front of us so that I can ask him this myself, so will the Minister urgently arrange a meeting with the Foreign Secretary for my constituent whose father is being held by Hamas, so that she may understand what this Government are doing for UK citizens who have hostage families?

Mr Mitchell: I assume that the hon. Member has spoken to the crisis centre about that particular example. If she has not, I hope she will, and of course, we will afford all support we can to her constituent.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The news of the burial in a mass grave of babies, children and other patients at Al-Shifa Hospital is heartbreaking, as was the news of the murder, mutilation and capture of babies, children and other innocent civilians in Israel on 7 October. I agree with the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), that the Government must now urge concrete steps to protect civilian life. Does the Minister agree that we need humanitarian pauses long enough to ensure that lifesaving aid reaches hospitals, as well as the release of hostages and the safe movement of innocent civilians?

Mr Mitchell: We will undoubtedly continue to do everything we can to support humanitarian supplies getting in and to develop the concept of the pause to maximum effect. It is the role of the Government, through their very strong diplomatic connections with all parts of the region, to do everything they can to drive forward those humanitarian aims.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I apologise—I am new here and do not yet know everybody. [*Laughter.*] I call Kenny MacAskill.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Hamas today conjured up memories of Christmas truces before the horror recommenced, but this is not soldiers in the trenches; it is 2.2 million people trapped in a tight urban environment, including women and children. Is that not the reason that a humanitarian pause is insufficient and there must be an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The circumstances that the hon. Member describes are precisely the reason why the British Government put such a high priority on trying to advance those humanitarian aims, some of which, at least, can be advanced through the humanitarian pauses we are so trenchantly seeking.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): On 24 October, I asked the Minister in this House about care for pregnant women and new-born babies in Gaza. Since I asked that question three weeks ago, approximately 3,400 children have been born amidst devastation and destruction. Given that it is quite clear that four-hour pauses are totally inadequate, can the Minister tell me what specific steps his Department will take to protect hospitals, deliver humanitarian aid to pregnant women and children and stop premature deaths?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member makes her point with great eloquence, and it underlines the effort and importance that the Government attach to trying to drive humanitarian support through these pauses to those who desperately need it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have been calling for a humanitarian pause for some time, but the death toll has risen, and the humanitarian crisis deepens by the hour. As a result, we clearly need a ceasefire, to move to a political process and a political solution. Can the Minister say what steps he is taking to formulate that political solution?

Mr Mitchell: It is not just our Government who are arguing for this; it is Governments around the world. Everyone is focused on trying to bring this dreadful situation to a conclusion and drive towards a political process. That is what we need. The hon. Member asks what I am doing. I will go tonight to Egypt to further these discussions.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The situation in Gaza cannot continue as it is, and everything needs to be done to bring this humanitarian devastation to an end. Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), will the Minister condemn acts of violence and extremism by Israeli settlers in the west bank?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady will know, I hope, the Prime Minister and the Government have condemned settler violence and urged the Israeli Government to crack down on it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is difficult to get aid and medicine into Gaza, but there is no shortage of arms in the region. I have been contacted by many constituents concerned about Britain's role in supplying British-made weapons to Israel. In the absence of the Committees on Arms Export Controls meeting at all this year, what assurances can the Minister give that the weapons we are supplying are not being used in acts of collective punishment?

Mr Mitchell: I refer the hon. Lady to my response a few moments ago, in which I made clear that Britain has the most rigorous arms sale regime anywhere in the world—it is extremely important that we have that.

[*Mr Mitchell*]

I will look carefully to see whether there is any aspect of the hon. Lady's question that suggests we should do more.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): On Friday, the Palestine Red Crescent Society said that Israeli forces opened fire on the intensive care unit at Al-Quds Hospital, and Médecins Sans Frontières reported a doctor in Al-Shifa Hospital saying that a sniper attacked four patients inside that hospital. We are seeing babies dying—what is happening is a stain on our collective humanity. I implore the Government please to join the overwhelming majority of the British public, humanitarian organisations and other nations in calling for an immediate ceasefire, to prevent the further death of innocent civilians and resolve what is a humanitarian catastrophe.

Mr Mitchell: I think the hon. Lady should put some greater hope in the achievement of humanitarian pauses, and then the development of those pauses. In the meantime, as she will be aware, it is the policy of both the Government and the Opposition that we should promote pauses, not a ceasefire.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister confirm that it is the Government's position that there should be no compulsion for people to leave their homes in Gaza, and that when people are displaced by fighting, they must be allowed to return home as soon as possible?

Mr Mitchell: The Government are acutely aware of the extraordinarily difficult situation in Gaza, and it is not for me to give advice from the Dispatch Box to people on the ground there who need to assess their situation for themselves within their community.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The UN says that telecommunications will begin to fail from Thursday as fuel runs out for the providing companies. Some lives have been saved when people have been telephoned to inform them that their homes are about to be bombed. Can any steps be taken to deliver fuel specifically to telecommunications companies?

Mr Mitchell: I have also seen those reports—they are extremely worrying, and they intensify the requirement to get fuel into Gaza as quickly as possible.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Among so many horrors that we have seen since the horrific and illegal attacks by Hamas on 7 October, the images of tiny babies in Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza being kept warm with improvised incubation are unbearable. That is not for the want of incubators; it is for the want of fuel.

The Minister spoke from the Dispatch Box a few moments ago about the offer of fuel made by the Israeli Government yesterday, but the head of one of the aid agencies on the ground in Gaza has explained what that offer was: a few jerry cans left outside the hospital, amounting to half an hour of generation time. Half an hour of fuel for generators is not what is needed, and it is not what international law requires, so can I press the Minister on what action he is taking to hold the Israeli

Government to account for the unacceptable stoppage of aid into Gaza, including fuel, and for their maintenance of international law?

Mr Mitchell: It is true, I think, that 300 litres of fuel was offered yesterday and it was rejected by Hamas—that is the key point. Some fuel was offered. Obviously, we hope that more fuel can get through, but if Hamas refuse to allow it to be used for the extremely important purposes that the hon. Lady has set out, the position will not improve.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The new Foreign Secretary called Gaza an open-air prison in peacetime. While we all stood with Israel on 7 October, what are the limits of self-defence—a population forcibly displaced by donkey because there is no fuel, or communications blackouts? When will the UK join France, Spain, the UN and all the aid agencies in advocating a cessation of hostilities? We cannot go on like this 20 hours a day.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes an eloquent plea for us to advance on all the things that the Government, along with others, are doing everything they can to progress.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): While the whole House should condemn unreservedly the atrocities committed against Israeli civilians on 7 October by the terror organisation Hamas, do His Majesty's Government believe that the ongoing response of the Israel Defence Forces remains proportionate, and will they keep the matter under review?

Mr Mitchell: I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to what I said earlier about the work of the Israel Defence Forces, and indeed the training they undergo, which respects international humanitarian law and understands the obligations a military force owes to civilians.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I have constituents who are heartbroken and devastated about the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Hospitals and patients, particularly babies, must be protected and cannot become targets. Does the Minister agree that the aid that is getting into Gaza is still completely insufficient, and that it is unacceptable that siege conditions have not been lifted?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady suggests, it is completely insufficient. That is why we are arguing so trenchantly for the opening of not just Rafah, but Kerem Shalom, so that more aid can be got in for those who desperately need it.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): After the terrorist atrocity of 7 October and with an estimated 11,000 Palestinians dead, there is a new fear: that of forced and permanent displacement of the Palestinian people. Accompanied by a drumbeat of senior voices, there are pressures on third countries to take the Gazan population as refugees. Can the Minister take this opportunity to say that neither this Government nor the international community regard that as acceptable in any way?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady once again demonstrates the dreadful position that the appalling act perpetrated by Hamas terrorists on 7 October has landed people in.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I think I heard the Minister correctly just now when he confirmed reports in the *Financial Times* that all but one of the hospitals in the north of Gaza have stopped functioning. That news is catastrophic, and my constituents just want to know—as all of us do—that there is some hope that this hell is coming to an end. As such, further to the responses he gave to the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), can I ask the Minister to describe the UK Government's diplomatic strategy? He has mentioned that he will be travelling this evening: which of our partners will he be engaging to bring this war to an end?

Mr Mitchell: I will be travelling to Egypt tonight, but the discussions that are going on are about the hostages and the humanitarian situation, which I have explained extensively today. There are also discussions about the politics and how we move on. Those discussions are going on not just within the British Government, but with our partners, allies and like-minded parties overseas—in particular, through the extraordinary diplomatic reach of the British Foreign Office with all the countries in the region, which of course care as much as we do about the appalling loss of life.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): In 2010, the then UK Prime Minister, now the Foreign Secretary, condemned the blockade of Gaza as a “prison camp”. The siege conditions have remained, and that is the context in which this war has claimed the lives of 11,000 civilians in Gaza, following the horrific Hamas attacks that have cost the lives of 1,400 innocent civilians and led to the hostage taking of over 200 people. The reality is that the longer the Gaza war continues, the more palpable is the danger of further contagion not only in the west bank and Jerusalem, but across the region. We could be on the precipice of a regional war, and of tensions enduring beyond Gaza and Israel and causing full-scale conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. That is why it is imperative for our Government to work with international partners to seek the cessation of hostilities and to work for an enduring humanitarian ceasefire. So much is at stake here, and it is for our Government to take that leadership role. I call on the Minister to do so.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member has set out with great eloquence the issue before us, and it underlines the absolute necessity to get back on to a political track as swiftly as we can.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Minister continues to say that he wants the Government of Israel to respect international human rights law, but last week he said that the Government could not make a determination whether that was happening. He said it would be for courts and lawyers to determine, so which courts and which lawyers, and how and when should a determination be made about whether Israel is complying with international humanitarian law?

Mr Mitchell: The point I made last week is that it is not for Ministers to assert what is in effect a legal judgment and that it should be left to the courts. I think that is a sensible measure for us to accept. The hon. Member will be aware that there are many different people—I quoted, for example, the guardians of the Geneva convention and international humanitarian law—and I do not think there will be any difficulty in hearing from the judicial authorities on that matter.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): The call for a ceasefire is backed by multiple United Nations agencies, 700 NGOs, Pope Francis, more than 250 British lawyers, the 120 countries that voted in favour of a UN General Assembly motion and 76% of the public, and yesterday the Archbishop of Canterbury said that “the call for a ceasefire is a moral cry”.

What will it take for the newly installed Secretary of State to heed these international calls and to support an immediate ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: I yield to no one in my profound respect for the Archbishop of Canterbury, but I think the reasons set out by both Government and Opposition Front Benchers about why that is not a practical approach should be listened to with care. Meanwhile, we will do everything we can to address the humanitarian situation, which has been so eloquently set out across the House.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Given the grave seriousness and scale of the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Gaza, it is vital that the length of humanitarian pauses is sufficient to allow aid and supplies to reach safely those who need them. In the statement, the Minister acknowledges that four hours is not enough, so the first question is: by the Government's own assessment, how long is needed? Secondly, will the Government finally meet the shadow Foreign Secretary's request for an international aid co-ordinator to be appointed to make sure that aid really reaches where it is needed?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the co-ordination of aid, but principally we need to get it into the country. I have set out that this is about not just the length of the pauses, but the nature of how the aid is then distributed. The British Government are working with our partners to progress all those things.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I give thanks to Islamic Relief for the heroic work it is doing in getting aid to people in need in Gaza. However, this is not a natural disaster, and aid and supplies can be switched back on. Does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable for Israel not to lift its siege conditions?

Mr Mitchell: I pay tribute, as the hon. Member did, to Islamic Relief, which I visited in Birmingham on Sunday with Andy Street, the West Midlands Mayor. Islamic Relief is doing extraordinary work still. It has access to fuel, and it has access to ways of making sure that water purification can continue to take place. We work closely with it, as we work with so many others, to try to bring an end to this dreadful situation.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Avi Shlaim is an Arab Jew, who was born in Baghdad, served in the Israel Defence Forces and is a retired professor of international affairs at the University of Oxford. He probably knows more about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict than most of us, and he says:

“revenge is not a policy.”

Do the British Government reject the position of the Israeli Government that they should have overall security control of Gaza after current military operations?

Mr Mitchell: I think we can all agree that revenge is not a policy, but given the appalling events of 7 October, I want to emphasise that the Israeli Government have an absolute right to self-defence.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister said that the arguments for and against a ceasefire have been fully rehearsed, but the situation in the hospitals and the ongoing slaughter of innocent civilians fleeing the hostilities illustrate that these humanitarian pauses are not working. The difficulty is that our constituents can see this terrible situation unfolding on the television every evening, and that is why they are writing to us in their thousands about it. What they want to know and what I want to know is this: how many more innocent people have to die before the UK Government will support a call for a ceasefire from both sides?

Mr Mitchell: The Government and, indeed, Labour Front Benchers have explained why calls for a ceasefire do not work at the moment. We have explained the Israeli Government’s right to self-defence, but also that Hamas have made it clear that not only do they not want a ceasefire, but they want to repeat what happened on 7 October. The position in those circumstances is that, to alleviate human suffering and to progress humanitarian efforts to get supplies in, we should try to develop the humanitarian pause, and that is what we will continue to do.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): The suffering of innocent civilians in Gaza is intolerable. The siege must end, the bombing must end and we need an end to hostilities. Does the Minister share my worry that the way the war on Hamas is being prosecuted—the constant bombing, the scale of the loss of life and suffering—runs the risk of radicalising people and driving them into the arms of Hamas and other terrorist extremists? Would he comment on that, and on whether that view is being expressed to the Israeli Government?

Mr Mitchell: The British Government have many friends and a brilliant diplomatic network in the region, and we express ourselves without fear or favour to give the best advice that the British Government have.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Minister said that it is not for Ministers to confirm or ascertain what is and is not a war crime, but I remind him that Government Ministers rightly condemned Vladimir Putin for his war crimes in Ukraine very quickly after the invasion. The Minister mentioned the sanctity of hospitals, which are places protected under the Geneva convention, yet when I mentioned this exact

issue last week, he did not accept my analysis of the Geneva convention. With reports of hospitals being bombed, IDF snipers firing into Al-Shifa and civilians, including children, being fired on while trying to evacuate under white flags, I repeat: what will it take for the Government and Opposition Front Benchers to call acts such as this what they are—war crimes?

Mr Mitchell: I have set out very clearly during this statement and in responses to Members across the House the absolutely essential nature of the progress we seek to make. I hope that the hon. Member will accept that my answer this week will be no different from the answer I gave him on Wednesday last week.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I thank the House for its patience. We have come in just inside the Speaker’s time limit.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Not to detract in any way from the integrity of the Minister, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), but many have spoken about the absurd scrutiny situation of the new Foreign Secretary being a Member of the House of Lords and unable to answer questions in this Chamber. Given the gravity of the situation we are dealing with, is it not right that we change the Standing Orders to enable us to call Lords to appear in this place to answer questions on this matter from the Dispatch Box?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is well aware that the Speaker has made a statement on this. The matter is under consideration, and it is not my place to seek to second-guess the advice that the Speaker is given.

I thank the Minister for his statement, and I wish him a safe and productive journey.

BILLS PRESENTED

CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary James Cleverly, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Alex Chalk, Secretary Michael Gove, the Attorney General, Chris Philp and Edward Argar, presented a Bill to amend the criminal law; to make provision about criminal justice (including the powers and duties of the police) and about dealing with offenders; to make provision about confiscation and the use of monies in suspended accounts; to make other provision about the prevention and detection of crime and disorder; to make provision about begging, rough sleeping and anti-social behaviour; to make provision about the police; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill10) with explanatory notes (Bill 10-EN).

SENTENCING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Alex Chalk, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Grant Shapps, Secretary Michelle Donelan, Secretary Steve Barclay, Secretary Mel Stride, Secretary

Lucy Frazer and the Attorney General, presented a Bill to make provision about the sentencing of offenders convicted of murder or sexual offences; to make provision about the suspension of custodial sentences; to make provision about the release of offenders, including provision about release on licence; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 11) with explanatory notes (Bill 11-EN).

Debate on the Address

5TH DAY

Debate resumed (Order, 13 November).

Question again proposed,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which Your Majesty has addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

Economic Growth

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (m) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I call Rachel Reeves.

1.59 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, at the end of the Question to add:

“but respectfully regret that the Gracious Speech fails to include legislative proposals to prevent a repeat of the economic fallout from the September 2022 Growth Plan, by amending the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011 to give the Office for Budget Responsibility the power to produce and publish forecasts for any Government fiscal event which includes tax and spending decisions with long-term effects over a threshold to be specified in a new Charter for Budget Responsibility.”

It is fair to say that the UK is not exactly gripped with excitement at the contents of the Conservative Government's King's Speech. It is as if Ministers have rummaged down the back of the sofa and found legislative loose change, a broken biro, some old Bills covered in fluff and even an old Prime Minister. In this current Tory era of three-word slogans, the country is thinking not, “Five more years!” but, “Is that it?”

It is clear what the Government's approach is in the run-up to that election. They have given up on trying to improve the country, so all they can now do is attempt to divide it. But they will fail because the Conservatives simply do not understand the priorities, hopes and values of the people of Britain today. After five Prime Ministers—one of them recycled—and seven Chancellors since 2010, the Conservatives find changing personnel rather easier than changing our country for the better.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am listening to the right hon. Lady's speech about values. The values of my constituents are such that they are calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Does she support those values?

Rachel Reeves: We have just had an hour and a half's worth of questions on that issue. I am going to focus on how to grow the economy and tackle the cost of living crisis.

I wish that today we were debating the Government's significant economic reforms and new measures to get our economy back on track after 13 years of Tory economic failure—but there weren't any. Their big tax reform is to consult on bringing in a new duty on vapes.

[Rachel Reeves]

Their big energy Bill does not even lower people's energy bills. In fact, a third of the Bills in the King's Speech are reheated from the previous Session. How out of touch must the Prime Minister be to peer down from 10,000 feet up in his helicopter and conclude that everything is going so well that there is no need for legislation and Government action to help unlock growth? This is the final King's Speech before the general election, and yet this set of proposals will not quicken the pulse, get the economy roaring or lift people's living standards. Where is the ambition? Where is the plan?

As the British Chambers of Commerce has pointed out:

"The King's Speech opened with an aspiration to increase economic growth—but it failed to outline how that will happen."

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share the concern of many that rather than improving, economic growth is forecast to go into reverse next year under the Tories? Does she agree that this new Tory economic failure does not bode well for people's living standards next year?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She will have seen that the forecasts published by the Bank of England just over a week ago show that the economy is expected to flatline not just throughout the rest of this year but all through next year as well.

There is something quite apt, even revealing, about the Conservatives wanting to use this King's Speech to protect the users of driverless cars from the damage they might inflict on others. The Conservative Government have been driving quite dangerously for 13 years. The current named driver of the vehicle—the third in four years—is nowhere to be seen, but there will be no protection for the Prime Minister or his party from voters' verdicts at the general election, whenever that comes.

The Government's King's Speech was a lost opportunity for our country. There was no legislation to reform the antiquated planning process and accelerate decisions around our critical national infrastructure. Instead, planning processes continue to hold back the success of our offshore wind sector, life sciences and 5G. There were no pension reforms to encourage growing British companies to stay here instead of being forced abroad for funding, which contributes to the UK's stagnating growth. There was no serious plan to help get energy bills down. The energy price cap has increased by half in this Parliament, yet the Energy Secretary has admitted that the Government's energy Bill

"wouldn't necessarily bring energy bills down",

whereas Labour has plans for clean power by 2030, a national wealth fund, insulating homes to lower bills, and the creation of GB Energy.

There is no focus from the Government on industrial strategy or on putting an industrial strategy council on a statutory footing to help drive the growth and investment that we need. Instead, the Government reach for sticking plasters when important sectors hit crisis. We need positive, long-term plans to make the most of our assets and create good-quality jobs here in Britain.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady for her strong and wise words. Like me and others in the House, she believes that the life sciences sector can grow and do much more. In 2019, the pharmaceutical sector alone provided 18% of research and development spending. There are almost 600,000 jobs in the industry and it contributes £36.9 billion in gross value added to GDP. Does the right hon. Lady agree that if we are to ensure that everyone can gain from life sciences, there must be better distribution across all of this great United Kingdom of GB and NI, and that NI must be a part of that?

Rachel Reeves: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. Our life sciences sector is key for Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and yet too many businesses are looking to relocate, including to the Republic of Ireland, but we want those jobs and those investments here in Britain.

There was no legislation in this King's Speech for fairer tax measures. The Chancellor and the Prime Minister have been so quick to raise taxes—they have done so 25 times between them—that we now have the highest tax burden in 70 years. It is the biggest tax hike ever in a single Parliament, with working people and businesses hit hard, yet the Government allow unjustifiable tax loopholes to remain. I believe that if people make Britain their home, they should pay their taxes here, too. That is why we will abolish the non-dom tax status and introduce a modern scheme for people who are genuinely living in the UK for short periods. Why is it so hard for this Prime Minister to say the same?

There was no legislation in this King's Speech to increase security at work or to update employment rights. Having confidence to plan a family's future should be not a luxury but something that working people deserve, and we need to grow our economy from the bottom up and the middle out. If an economy is not working for working people, it is not working at all. This King's Speech has no serious plans for tackling the cost of living crisis or for growing the UK economy.

The Conservative economic failures are piling up high: a failure on growth; a failure on infrastructure investments; a failure on the cost of living; a failure on public services; and a failure on tax. The responsibility for such disappointment and damage has been a Conservative team effort these past 13 years. The Government cannot get our economy back on track or make our country better off. The Conservatives cannot and have not tackled the cost of living crisis because they are the cost of living crisis.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we are still paying the price of the failed Tory policies since 2010 that have weakened our NHS, stripped funding from our local council services and stopped Labour's school repairs programme?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The truth is that the combination of austerity, which was five Prime Ministers ago, Brexit without a plan—which relates to most of them—and the kamikaze Budget has contributed to the parlous state of our economy and the cost of living crisis that we are enduring today.

This is a party led—and I say “led” in the loosest sense of the word—by a Prime Minister with no mandate whatsoever and with no authority or vision for the future. This Prime Minister appears to be spending more time polishing his CV in conversation with Elon Musk than fighting for the livelihoods of manufacturing workers in Scunthorpe, Port Talbot and Derby.

And it is the previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), who still sets the tune for so many in the Conservative party. She wanted to scrap the bankers’ bonus cap in the kamikaze Budget last year, and that has now been dutifully delivered by this Prime Minister and this Chancellor. When the previous Prime Minister called this year for delaying the timetable for new electric cars by five years, undermining both the net zero consensus and the British automotive industry, this Prime Minister and this Chancellor delivered. Today, the former Prime Minister’s so-called growth commission is setting out its demands for next week’s autumn statement, oblivious to the damage already done. Will the Chancellor tell the House whether he agrees with the person who appointed him to do the job he is now doing and her proposals to slash corporation tax, abolish inheritance tax, abolish stamp duty and other unfunded commitments that make last year’s mini-Budget look like small fry, with tax cuts announced totalling £80 billion?

Labour will never gamble with the livelihoods of working people, as the Conservatives have. Labour’s economic approach is built on a rock of fiscal responsibility, with respect for taxpayers’ money. We will work in partnership with industry to bring about the change that our country so desperately needs. We know what the Tories did last autumn. They blew up our economy with their reckless, unfunded promises and a trashing of our economic institutions. It was a collective failure from the Tories. It was not just one bad apple, but a whole orchard of irresponsibility. The Conservative leadership contest of summer 2022 produced a sum total of £200 billion of unfunded promises. The Chancellor did not want to be left out. His leadership candidacy might not have been as successful or lasted as long as he may have wished, but there was still time for him to make almost £80 billion of unfunded commitments himself on corporation tax, business rates and defence, with no idea how those commitments would be funded.

Following the leadership election last year, Conservative Cabinet Ministers tried to blindfold the nation and global financial markets by preventing the Office for Budget Responsibility from publishing its assessments. The Conservatives knew that the truth would hurt, but they continued to gamble with the livelihoods of our country. The pound crashed, pensions were put in peril and interest rates soared. Working people were made to pay the price for the Conservatives’ kamikaze Budget and reckless eagerness to cut the taxes of the wealthiest few. It was reckless, it was irresponsible, and with Labour it will never happen.

The result is an average Conservative mortgage penalty of £220 each and every month for hard-working homeowners. This out-of-touch Government do not have a clue about what that really means for people. That is a lot of money to try to find from nowhere each and every month. It means holidays cancelled, spending cut back and life made harder. Some families are having to downsize, and others who have been trying to get on

the housing ladder for years have had their dreams snuffed out. Meanwhile, rents rise as landlords see their mortgages go up and want to pass the costs on.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a good point about housing costs and the shortage of housing in this country. Is it not therefore astounding that, given the climate we are in, there is not one single word about housing in the whole King’s Speech? There is not a single word about the shortage of housing or the rising costs of housing, no long-term proposals to build on this vague commitment of 300,000 homes, and no idea how to build them.

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully on what he knows well. On top of the big challenges with house building and the Government getting rid of their housing targets, the number of homeowners in arrears on their mortgage is also up a staggering 18% compared with a year ago. The Conservatives are no longer the party of home ownership. Higher housing costs are the last thing people need in a painful cost of living crisis. It should never have happened in the first place, and it must never happen again.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Will the right hon. Lady enlighten us on the Labour party’s views on our precious green belt, because my constituents are terrified that a Labour Government will build houses all over it?

Rachel Reeves: Labour’s approach is brownfield-first. We also know that there is land designated as green belt that is no such thing. For example, there is a petrol station in Tottenham that people cannot get planning permission for, because it is classified as green belt. People want that land built on, and I think we can all agree across the House that we need reforms to allow that to happen, but this Government scrapped the house building target. Home ownership is falling under the Conservatives. The Conservatives were once the party of home ownership; they can no longer claim that mantle. It is Labour today that is the party of home ownership and of aspiration for working families.

Today the Conservatives can show that they have learned a lesson from last year. They can back Labour’s commitment to strengthen the Office for Budget Responsibility in our amendment. We believe that where a fiscal event is making significant and permanent tax and spending changes, the OBR should be able to freely and independently publish a forecast of the impact of those changes. No Government of the day should be able to stop it from doing so. In the event of an emergency, where changes must be introduced at speed and a forecast cannot be produced in time, the OBR would be allowed to set a date for when it can publish a forecast. The public should be able to read an independent assessment on the health of our economy, to understand the consequences of proposals and to see the prices on the menu.

The amendment should not be remotely controversial, and I look forward to seeing Conservative MPs and Ministers joining us in supporting this sensible measure today. If they do not, it will show that they have not learned a thing, and that the Conservatives continue to present a real and present danger to our economy.

[Rachel Reeves]

What will be the legacy of 13 years of this Conservative Government? They have damaged our economy, trashed our public services, failed to invest in the industries of the future, squeezed people's living standards and caused a calamitous cost of living crisis. A Labour Government will clean up that mess. We will clamp down on waste and fraud from the pandemic, because the country is sick of being ripped off and we want our money back. We will tax fairly, spend wisely and grow the economy. We will get the NHS back on its feet. The Conservatives have broken our public services before, but Labour Governments have fixed them in the past, and we will do so again.

As bad as the public finances are under the Conservatives, there will always be choices, so we will abolish the non-dom tax status and use that money to help our NHS tackle record waiting times and introduce free breakfast clubs for all primary school-aged children. We will close the tax loophole that gives private equity managers a huge tax break. We will close the tax loopholes benefiting private schools, which gain from not having to pay VAT and business rates, and use that money to support the 93% of children attending our state schools. If the Conservatives want to have a fight over who is most aspirational for our young people when the ceilings are crumbling in our schools, I say bring it on.

After 13 years of Conservative Government, the questions that people will be asking at the next election are simple: "Do my family and I feel better off after 13 years of Conservative government? Do our schools, our hospitals and our transport infrastructure work better than when the Conservatives came to office 13 years ago? In fact, does anything in Britain work better today than when the Conservatives came to office?" The answer is a resounding no. This King's Speech is not remotely up to the task of changing our country for the better and meeting the challenges head on.

Real change cannot come from five more painful years under the Conservatives, but only from a fresh start with Labour. The Labour party is the only party of economic responsibility and with the ability to provide the change of direction and confidence that our country needs. As this King's Speech shows, this desperate, decaying Government are out of ideas, out of excuses and increasingly out of time. If the Prime Minister and Chancellor are so confident about the Conservatives' record, let us take it to the ballot box and let the British people decide.

2.18 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): It is an honour to speak in the first King's Speech debate for more than 70 years. Her late Majesty was a figure of grace and continuity, and we now look forward to His Majesty the King leading us, as she did, through troubled times.

It is always a pleasure to debate with the shadow Chancellor, although in a whole year of my being Chancellor, this is the first time we have had an economy debate, and now we know why: she has been busy writing a book, or, rather, Wikipedia has been busy writing her book. Today, I see she has been busy copying and pasting Conservative language about tax. May I tell

her gently that that will take her only so far? Conservative Members will never forget what happened under Gordon Brown, who she campaigned for: income tax up, national insurance up, stamp duty up, fuel duty up, pensions up and multiple other taxes up.

Let us turn to some of the shadow Chancellor's assertions. She said that the economy was flatlining. What she did not tell the House was that since Labour left the economy in the deepest recession since the second world war, we in this country have grown faster than Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany or Japan. She did not mention that after a global pandemic and energy shock, our economy is nearly 2% bigger than it was pre-pandemic. That is higher, for example, than countries such as Germany, whose economy is only 0.3% larger, not least thanks to the furlough scheme introduced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

The shadow Chancellor also did not mention that when it comes to the fastest-growing industries, we are doing even better. In the last 13 years under Conservative Governments, we have built Europe's largest tech sector—double the size of Germany's and three times that of France; it is the third-largest in the world. We also have Europe's largest life science sector, saving more lives than any other country globally with vaccines and treatments discovered in Britain. We have more offshore wind than anywhere in Europe bar Germany and Norway—it is the third-largest sector in the continent. We also have a world-leading creative industries sector, including Europe's largest film and TV industry and a thriving publishing industry that has even produced a book written by the shadow Chancellor, which helpfully collates some fascinating information from the world wide web.

Mr Betts: The Chancellor talks about what he sees as some successes. Why does he not address the problems of small modular reactors? Sheffield Forgemasters in my constituency could be building SMRs, but it has been waiting for months for the Government to make a decision on a go-ahead for the right techniques. ITM Power, which is a leader in green hydrogen, is building plant in Germany, which is spending £7 billion on it in the next few years, while in this country we are spending £1 billion, so we are losing the international race on that.

Jeremy Hunt: The first big infrastructure decision that I took was on nuclear, when I assigned £700 million to Sizewell C. I completely agree with the hon. Member about the potential of SMR. That is why we set up a competition, and with the previous Energy Secretary I stipulated that it should finish by the end of this calendar year so that we can proceed as quickly as possible on SMR, because it could be an important part of our net zero future.

The shadow Chancellor's central argument is that we can get growth only by borrowing £28 billion a year more. [Interruption.] Well, I was listening to her words. She may not have mentioned this in her speech, but on 9 October she said on the "Today" programme that she wanted to take borrowing "up"—her word. We delivered all those achievements in technology, life science, creative industries and advanced manufacturing industries during a time when we were cutting borrowing, which went down by 80% between 2010 and the start of the pandemic.

That is the difference. Unlike Labour, the Conservatives know that we cannot borrow our way to growth. We have to do the hard work to support entrepreneurs and innovators, including by keeping their taxes down, which Labour has never wanted to do. Because we have done just that, the International Monetary Fund says that after inflation has been brought to target from the end of 2025, this country will have faster growth than France, Germany or Italy. No shortcuts; just hard work to get one of the fastest growth rates in Europe.

Alan Brown: On investment in renewable energy, EY has confirmed today that the UK has slipped further back on the attractiveness index, so it is now behind India, China and Australia. On offshore wind, the Chancellor knows that allocation round 5 was a disaster. What will he do to rectify that? On nuclear, he talks about SMRs being the future, but they are not. There is not a successful SMR anywhere in the world, and NuScale in the United States has just been abandoned after rising to an estimated cost of \$9 billion.

Jeremy Hunt: I do not accept that we are not an extremely attractive place. We have third largest renewables sector in Europe and are the largest European provider of offshore wind. Can we do more? Yes, we can, particularly by improving access to the grid. The House should expect to hear more from us on that.

We had a lot of talk from the shadow Chancellor about the cost of living crisis, but she barely mentioned that the biggest pressure on the cost of living is caused by the rise in inflation—in fact, it did not get a mention at all in her conference speech. Because we have taken difficult decisions, inflation has fallen by 40% since its peak. Core inflation is now lower than in nearly half the entire EU membership. I say gently to her that if she were to reflate the economy by ramping up borrowing by £28 billion a year, prices would go up and families would end up paying more for their petrol, their food, their electricity and their mortgages. That is why that is the wrong approach.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): One issue on borrowing that has not been talked about is that it is now four years since this place agreed that we should regulate the buy now, pay later lenders. Under this Government's watch, the number of people borrowing from these companies to make ends meet during the cost of living crisis has doubled, and 40% of those people are struggling and borrowing from other lenders to pay their debts, yet we have still seen no regulation at all from the Government. If the Chancellor wants to prove that he is actually on the side of the people and understands the bills that they have racked up paying for this Tory Government's failures, will he finally commit to regulating these loan sharks?

Jeremy Hunt: As the hon. Member might have heard if she had been at oral questions, we are acting on this and have been consulting on a solution since March this year—I started that at the spring Budget—but we want to get the answer right. We want to crack down on rogue lenders but also ensure that the financing that appropriate people can offer responsibly is available.

I want to talk about the pressures on ordinary families, because the shadow Chancellor also talked about incomes and the tax burden on working families. What has

happened since 2010 to adults on the lowest legally payable wage? When we took over from Labour, that wage was £5.93 an hour; today, it is £10.42 an hour. After inflation, gross pay for those on the lowest legally payable wage has gone up by 20%. The number of people on low pay, defined as less than two thirds of median hourly earnings, has halved. At the same time, because Conservative Governments want to make work pay, we increased the thresholds before which people start to pay tax or national insurance from £5,700 to £12,570. Take-home pay after tax for people on the adult main minimum wage has therefore gone up by more than 25% after inflation. That is a bigger percentage increase than for people on much higher incomes.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Notwithstanding what the Chancellor has said, my constituents in Edinburgh West, like those in much of the rest of the country, were listening intently to the King's Speech for a Bill or anything that might help them with the cost of food and specifically energy this coming winter, but there was nothing, and it has been admitted that the petroleum Bill will not do anything to help households in this country. Does he appreciate why ordinary working families think that the Government are simply out of touch?

Jeremy Hunt: With respect, I think the hon. Member needs to look at the facts. We have given an average of £3,300 in cost of living support to families across the country this year and last. In Scotland, 700,000 households have benefited from our cost of living payments, which have reached more than 1 million pensioners.

I want to return to my main point about the impact of making work pay. As a result of that change, not only have a lot of people been lifted out of poverty, but unemployment has gone down by a million, after going up by nearly half a million under Labour, and the unemployment rate has halved. That is the difference: if we make work pay, as the Conservatives do, we lift people out of poverty and put people into work.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What would the minimum wage be worth now if the right hon. Member's party had succeeded in its attempts to wreck the legislation when it was introduced by the last Labour Government?

Jeremy Hunt: I simply say that we did not just build on that reform but improved it massively more than Labour proposed, because we turned it into the national living wage, which is far more generous than the original minimum wage.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): According to the House of Commons Library, in 2022 the tax burden on the lowest income decile was 25.5%. On the top income decile, it was 12.5%. Is that fair?

Jeremy Hunt: Because we believe in a progressive tax system, we introduced the changes that I just outlined, which mean that people on the lowest legal wage are getting 25% more after tax. That is a significantly bigger increase than for people on higher deciles.

One of the main things the shadow Chancellor mentioned was her amendment on the OBR. I understand the political game of trying to draw attention to the

[Jeremy Hunt]

mini-Budget, but she should know that the OBR is already legally required to publish two forecasts a year, as will happen under this Government at successive autumn statements and spring Budgets. Today's proposal is dangerous because, despite what she says, it would hamper the Government when acting in an emergency, as we did in the pandemic. I will tell her why. Instead of taking decisive action, Governments would feel obliged to enter a 12-week process with the OBR in case the outcome of the independent process that she advocates made any crisis worse by highlighting a significant loosening of the fiscal rules.

What is most extraordinary about the amendment is that, at the same time that the shadow Chancellor tries to claim the mantle of fiscal responsibility in this House, only this morning she briefed the papers that she wants to unfreeze income tax thresholds—a £9 billion commitment—and make full expensing permanent, which is a £10 billion commitment. That is all without an OBR forecast in sight. That kind of irresponsibility from Labour is exactly why we set up the OBR in the first place.

This is an argument not just about jobs and work but about poverty. Labour tried to eradicate poverty by tinkering with the benefits system and Gordon Brown's tax credits. We all remember the "poverty plus a pound" idea, whereby if someone just below the poverty threshold is given £1, they are somehow magically lifted out of destitution. Instead, the Conservative Government have reduced the numbers in absolute poverty after housing costs by 1.7 million people by making work pay and by reducing the number of children living in workless households, because they are five times more likely to be in absolute poverty than households in which the adults work. Making work pay is a moral duty and not just an economic necessity, as only Conservatives understand.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Work is the best way to eliminate poverty. What are the Chancellor's reflections on the fact that every Labour Government have left office with unemployment higher?

Jeremy Hunt: My reflection is quite simply that the Labour party does not understand how to lift people out of poverty. Labour Members do not like us talking about the fact that nearly 2 million people have been lifted out of absolute poverty under Conservative Governments, because that does not fit their austerity story, but the reality is that a Conservative Government have been responsible for a very important piece of social progress.

I want to turn to the autumn statement, because as we start to win the battle against inflation we can focus on the next stage, which is growth. Next week, we will see an autumn statement for growth. Because no business can expand without hiring additional staff, I will address labour supply issues to help fill the nearly 1 million vacancies we have, working with the excellent Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. That will build on the 30 hours of free childcare offer that I announced for all eligible children over nine months in the spring Budget. I will also focus on increasing business investment, because despite the fact that our growth has been faster than that of many of our European neighbours, our productivity is still lower.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): My right hon. Friend talks about growth and productivity, and he knows that it is my strong view that steel is an incredibly important material for growth here in this country. Will he reassure the very concerned steelworkers in Scunthorpe that he is concentrating on that, and working on it on our behalf?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend has talked to me consistently and powerfully since I became Chancellor about the issues facing the steel industry. She is a strong advocate for her constituents. It is at the top of my mind, as we try to chart a better future for British Steel. We will bear in mind the many comments she has made.

The shadow Chancellor said in her conference speech that she would remove the barriers to business investment, by

"backing the builders not the blockers".

Only weeks later, her party promptly U-turned and became a blocker by watering down changes to the rules on nutrient neutrality, which would have unlocked the building of 100,000 homes. That is 100,000 families whose future is on hold because of Labour's political games.

On top of all the measures in the autumn statement, we will have the Bills from the King's Speech, including a trade Bill that will confirm our membership of the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, making us part of a group that yields a combined GDP of £12 trillion and a presence in the Indo-Pacific, where the majority of global growth will be. The Automated Vehicles Bill, which the shadow Chancellor mocked, will make the UK one of the first countries in the world to have a legal structure to allow driverless cars. The Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill will modernise our digital laws to boost online shopping by making it safer. The Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill will secure our energy independence by replacing imported oil and gas with domestically produced fuel as we transition to net zero.

The Leader of the Opposition called the King's Speech something that will only bring more of the same. In a way, he is right: more growth, more jobs, more pay, more opportunity and more prosperity. We are not following the easy path of opening the national cheque book and maxing the country's credit card by borrowing £28 billion a year more; we are taking a path that is more difficult, yes, but more durable, and one that will turn us into one of the most prosperous countries in Europe. I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Some 40 Members are seeking to contribute to the debate, and we have until 6.30 pm. After the Scottish National party spokesperson, I propose to introduce an immediate time limit of six minutes, which may have to fall to five. I call the SNP spokesperson.

2.37 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I did not hold out much hope of enlightenment from this debate, and it is fair to say that I am underwhelmed. This is a truly zombie Government, so bereft of ideas and talent that they have scoured the sheds of Chipping

Norton to find a former Prime Minister who, along with his Liberal Democrat coalition partners, set most of the economic woes on their way for Scotland and the other nations of the UK, and resurrected him into their Cabinet. What a signal; what a shambles.

It is to the shame of Westminster that the Government spend so much time reliving past failures, continuing to do the same thing over and over—culture war rhetoric, punishing the vulnerable, and ignoring the suffering of the most vulnerable and the poorest. One of the many former Prime Ministers of this failing Government—although, to be fair, an elected one—used to talk about those people “just about managing”. I have news for her and for this place: they ain’t just about managing any more. They are struggling. Many more each day are failing to get by. Food bills, energy bills, mortgages and rents are crushing them.

Given the misery that the Government have wrought through austerity, the infamous mini-Budget and everything else, they should have put the cost of living at the forefront of the King’s Speech. They should have listened to those struggling to pay their electricity bills, put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. Instead of talking about tents, they should have been talking about rents. While they pound the slogans of division by saying “stop the boats”, I trust the public will ensure that all they do for this terrible Government is stop the votes. Of course, being accountable and elected is not an issue for this place. The Tories and Labour will always simply create another Lord to do their bidding if they need to do so.

In a time so obviously marked by escalating living costs, the No. 1 concern on the doorsteps of Scotland—and, I contest, the other nations of the UK—is the cost of living. The King’s Speech glaringly overlooked the need for policies to assist households grappling with food and energy costs, mortgages and rents. While the Scottish Government have made a concerted and targeted effort to shield Scots from the brunt of Westminster policies, the omnipresent shadow of these often cruel Westminster directives remains inescapable.

The King’s Speech starkly underscored the unreliability of Westminster Governments in serving Scotland’s interests, with both the Tories and Labour wedded to a low-growth, Brexit-anchored economy. Independence and a return to the European Union, where all partners are treated as equals, is the only viable path for the prosperity of Scotland. The Scottish Government, within their limited capacity, strive to cushion Scots from Westminster’s harshest policies, yet Scotland’s full potential remains constantly stifled under the UK’s policy regime—a theme I will return to shortly.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): On the hon. Gentleman’s logic, if Brexit is the impediment to growth, why is it that since pre-pandemic times Britain has grown faster than either France or Germany?

Drew Hendry: Tory Members keep peddling this line, but what they know, and what everybody else knows, is that they started from a lower base because they tanked the economy in the first place. They have to live up to that responsibility. They claim higher growth from a lower point of entry. [*Interruption.*] They can try to shout me down, but I will make progress.

The King’s Speech, which was alarmingly brief on tackling the cost of living crisis, was a missed opportunity to offer concrete measures for relief. It paid lip service to reducing inflation and easing living costs, but lacked substantive policy proposals. Labour, too, is offering little on the cost of living crisis. Where are the measures that could be taken now to help people in their homes? Completely absent. Of course, that is just part of Labour’s “don’t scare the Tory voters” approach to securing office. The UK’s economic stagnation, which is evidenced by recent data, underscores a systemic failure to foster growth, post financial crisis. There is nothing in the King’s Speech to help support people, our food and drink industry, or our tourism and hospitality sector. That is something the Chancellor will need to correct before next week.

In a UK battling—unlike what the Government claim—rampant destitution, the failure of the King’s Speech to prioritise poverty reduction is indefensible, with millions, including a shocking number of children, unable to meet their basic needs. The situation in the UK is dire. Scotland’s lower destitution rate is a testament to SNP policies such as the Scottish child payment, but there is no attempt to replicate that anywhere in this House or to suggest that we do so. The eradication of poverty remains a more distant prospect under the current Westminster regime. Labour’s stance, echoing Tory rhetoric and policies, leaves independence as Scotland’s only hope for a fair and dynamic economy.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): The SNP spokesman is outlining to the Chamber his utopian world under an SNP Government. Can he outline why under the SNP Government education standards in Scotland have fallen at record levels and NHS standards in Scotland have fallen at record levels, and why his Government have failed the people of Scotland on the delivery of public services?

Drew Hendry: That is what the hon. Gentleman has in his prepared statement, but when we look at the facts, we see that that is not correct. Scotland’s accident and emergency departments, for example, have outperformed the rest of the UK for the past eight years. We have more doctors and nurses per head of population than anywhere else in the UK. On public services, the Tories are pushing councils to bankruptcy in England. In Scotland, we are managing to negotiate with unions to avoid strikes and keep the economy moving, which is not being replicated by this Tory Government down here.

Despite constraints, the Scottish SNP Government have implemented significant policies to alleviate the cost of living crisis. We have frozen council tax, introduced the Scottish child payment, supported disabled children, offered free school meals and provided free bus travel. Those are just a few examples of the Scottish Government’s proactive steps. Those measures, though effective, highlight the limitations of devolution under the Westminster system, underscoring the urgent need for greater powers in Scotland, for Scotland, to support its citizens fully.

Despite being a nation rich in energy resources, our people still face the pressing challenges of fuel poverty and high energy costs. Current UK energy policies and management continue to fail the people of Scotland. The fact that our energy wealth is significant is not open

[Drew Hendry]

to challenge. Despite numerous attempts to tell the people of Scotland that their oil and gas resources are running out, the UK Government now say that they will grant new licences every year. Scotland is producing six times more gas than it consumes. However, that abundance contrasts sharply with the high prices they are expected to pay and the increasing fuel poverty faced by our elderly in particular. In just two years, the fuel poverty rates among pensioners are a concerning trend that highlights another disconnect between resource richness and public benefit. Westminster policies have continually failed to translate Scotland's natural energy wealth into tangible benefits for its populace—they have done quite the opposite. They have resulted in an oppressively toxic cost of living and inflationary effect for Scottish households.

The lack of targeted measures in the King's Speech to address energy bill support further underscores that. Critics from various sectors have voiced their disappointment, emphasising the need for far more action on prices, investment and insulation, and many more renewable energy sources. The SNP has said we should have a £400 energy bill rebate and action on basic costs. We should have mortgage interest rate tax relief and there should be action on food costs, but of course we have not heard that from anywhere else in this Chamber.

In response to the challenges posed by Westminster's policies, the Scottish Government have been proactive in implementing measures to mitigate the impact on its residents. Those actions include, as I mentioned, freezing council tax and providing additional support for heating costs for the most severely disabled children and young people during winter. Furthermore, the Scottish Government's commitment to renewable energy and sustainability aligns with the broader goal of transitioning to a cleaner, more self-sufficient energy future. Westminster has singly failed to invest, most notably over a decade of dither and delay on the Peterhead carbon capture opportunity and subsequent potential hydrogen bonanza, and in its abject failure to meet the Scottish Government's £500 million investment in the just transition—incidentally another area where the Scottish Government have had to step in to plug the gap on reserved Westminster inaction.

The transfer of energy, employment, welfare and economic powers to the Scottish Parliament is essential. With those powers, the Scottish Government could implement more effective policies to support their citizens through the ongoing energy and cost of living crisis.

Looking globally, nations comparable in size to Scotland boast vibrant economies that benefit their citizens. Countries such as Iceland, Norway and Denmark exhibit lower income inequality and poverty rates, and higher social mobility compared with the UK. That comparison raises a crucial question: why should Scotland remain tethered to a Westminster system that fails to resonate with its values and hinders its potential to be fairer, wealthier and happier?

The King's Speech was a stark reminder of Westminster's detachment from Scotland's needs and the UK's broader societal challenges. It highlighted the necessity of independence for Scotland—the only path that leads towards a more equitable, prosperous future in line with the aspirations and values of the Scottish people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee.

2.49 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It has been said that we enjoyed a holiday from history between the fall of the Berlin wall and 11 September 2001, but unfortunately history has now etched two more horrendous dates into our memories: 24 February 2022 for Russia's evil invasion of Ukraine, and 7 October 2023 for Hamas's evil terrorist attack on innocent Israelis. It is against this tumultuous backdrop that we discuss His Majesty's historic first Gracious Speech—the first King's Speech for 70 years, and a speech that represents a profound moment in the stability and continuity of our unwritten constitution. That we were able to change our sovereign and change our Prime Minister twice last year and arrive at the Gracious Speech with entirely peaceful transitions of power is something that we should all find profoundly moving.

Our world seems increasingly dangerous, and around the perimeters of NATO we see terrible conflict and lots of mischief being played to stir up conflict. As a proud member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, I know how important it is that NATO countries continue to show unity and that our door is open to new members such as Sweden and Finland, as well as, of course, Ukraine, Moldova and, I hope, Georgia; I draw attention to my interest in that country. It is time that Putin realised that annexing his neighbours gives him more NATO on his borders, not less.

In His Majesty's Gracious Speech, there was not a lot to distract the Treasury Committee; that will come in next week's autumn statement—and let me add, in case colleagues are interested, that in addition to our Committee's scrutiny of that statement, the Bank of England and the financial regulators, we currently have open inquiries into access to finance for small and medium-sized businesses, quantitative tightening, sexism in the City and central bank digital currencies.

I am glad that His Majesty, and also the Chancellor today, have emphasised the focus on increasing economic growth. I am glad that everyone now agrees that we should continue to take action to bring down inflation, ease the cost of living for families, and help businesses to fund new jobs and investment. I am also glad that Ministers will help the Bank of England to return inflation to target. It is the Bank of England that has raised mortgage rates, and the Governor of the Bank of England has acknowledged that the only increases that mortgage payers are now seeing are thanks to its efforts to control inflation and are nothing to do with the decisions of our now responsible Treasury.

These decisions will help household finances, reduce public sector debt and safeguard the financial security of our country, about which my constituents care deeply. Tomorrow we should see a milestone in the quest to reduce inflation: the market expects the consumer prices index to decline to 4.7%, and, combined with wage growth of more than 7%, that means that real wage growth has returned to our economy. We have also seen low pay fall dramatically: fewer than 10% of the many millions more people who are now in work are low paid, thanks to the national living wage.

There was one omission from the Gracious Speech, in respect of what I regard as constitutional sexism in our country. No steps were announced to end the

indefensible system of “men only” seats in the other place. The 92 hereditary peerages are almost exclusively for men, and the Hereditary Titles (Female Succession) Bill, which I tried to get enacted in the last parliamentary Session in order to change that, sadly did not make it on to the statute book. I shall try again to get a good slot in the ballot for private Members’ Bills, and if I do so, I will reintroduce that Bill. If I do not get a good slot, I will invite my colleagues to take up the baton.

Mr Speaker: We now come to a maiden speech.

2.54 pm

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): It is a real honour to be here, speaking in this King’s Speech debate, after a by-election campaign that went on for one or two months longer than I think some of us anticipated. However, it left me with friendships and experiences that I hope will stay with me throughout my lifetime. There are perhaps one or two memories of slightly scarring use of statistics in leaflets, but the maths teacher in me hopes that I will be able to forget those rather sooner.

Most of all, there was an overwhelming sense that the community I represent is looking for change, a change back to a stable Government looking to the long term with a plan to get our future back on track: to make sure our communities can plan for the future with confidence again, rather than worrying about where the next setback will come from; to ensure that our businesses of the future can invest with confidence again, and seize the benefits of the industrial transitions to come; and to ensure that our fantastic rural farming community can get back to ploughing on with confidence, putting food on our plates and looking after our fantastic countryside.

This being my maiden speech, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Nadine Dorries. I think it fair to say that we differ somewhat in politics and personal style, but it is clear to me that she broke through many barriers on her way to this House, and she should take great pride in that. I also want to thank not one but two Prime Ministers for their incredibly warm welcome to the House over recent weeks, although I have to warn the current Prime Minister that although there are some areas in which I differ from my predecessor, I intend to continue her proud tradition of robust opposition to this Government.

Let me give credit where it is due, though. I am aware that by-elections over recent weeks have deprived the Government of a number of Members to take up Front-Bench positions, but I have to applaud the Prime Minister’s surprise creativity yesterday in filling one of those spots. It has given me an unexpected opportunity to repay that bipartisanship, and to extend a warm welcome back to the former Prime Minister as he returns to frontline politics. As a fellow Aston Villa fan, though, I really hope that his time as Foreign Secretary will not deprive him of an opportunity to enjoy our beloved team at the London stadium. [*Laughter.*]

I am embarrassed to admit that if some time ago someone had told me that I would be standing here as the Labour MP for Mid Beds, I would have responded in language that could only have been described as rather unparliamentary. While they may come from very different backgrounds, my friends, my family—who are here today—my former pupils and my former colleagues

at the Bank of England may all be having a similar reaction to seeing me here in the Chamber. However, I could not be prouder to have the honour of representing part of the county I grew up in. Although the name of my constituency may suggest otherwise, there is absolutely nothing middling about the beautiful 48 towns and villages of Mid Bedfordshire.

Taking full advantage of the convention that maiden speeches are made without interruption, I fully intend to make use of this opportunity to talk at great length, in great detail, about each and every one of those 48 towns and villages and what makes them special. I know that Members will welcome that: I can feel the enthusiasm in the Chamber. [*Laughter.*] I am sorry to disappoint some, however, but I will try to keep it brief, as I explain why those who were unable to join us on the by-election trail really did miss out.

From the beautiful village of Shillington to our picturesque market town of Shefford to our fantastic Norman monastery in Woburn, Mid Bedfordshire really does have something for everyone. In Cranfield, Members will find one of the best examples of our world-leading research, innovation and enterprise combined. Cranfield Aerospace is propelling forward green aviation, leading on proposals for hydrogen-fuelled flight based on research undertaken at Cranfield University. Along the Greensand Ridge, walkers will find some of the best countryside that Britain has to offer, from Woburn through Millbrook to Ampt Hill and beyond. That will also give Members the crucial chance to keep those steps up ahead of any future by-elections.

As they near Flitwick, Members will find Woburn Center Parcs, with which many families from right across the country will be familiar from getaways and celebrations over the years, and where hundreds of my constituents work all the year round to bring joy to holidaymakers. Let me draw the attention of the Whips on both sides of the House to the Subtropical Swimming Paradise. As well as a great place to spend an afternoon, I suggest that it might be a more amenable option for the Whips to offer Members should they approach them in the future, feeling the lure of an escape to the jungle that might be on the cards and wanting some advice about what to do next.

But as anyone who has been to my constituency will know, it is not just the place that is so special; it is the people living there. People like Rob and Sue who, having formed a closer bond with their community in Harlington through covid, wanted to do more to bring them together after lockdown. They founded the fantastic Hub and Spoke café, which continues to go from strength to strength in delighting residents, and also recently impressing as robust a critic as the odd “Newsnight” journalist. People like Richard and the whole Ampt Hill fireworks organising committee, who stepped up when the treasured local firework display was under threat back in 2011 to ensure that it continued. They put on a display each year that wows thousands and raises many thousands more for really fantastic charities across my constituency. And people like Lou and Shaun, who have put so much into making the Brewery Tap in Shefford such a beloved pillar of our community. They run charity breakfasts and organise armed services days, and crucially, they have recently had to put up with rather more visits from a certain Labour parliamentary candidate, now the MP, than any publican should have to endure, but they did so with a brave and smiling face.

[Alistair Strathern]

From these stories, Mr Speaker, you might be under the impression that all is well in my constituency and that life for everyone is rosy, but sadly the great potential of my place is not on offer to all my residents. Take Margaret from Broom, who is in her 60s, partially sighted and in poor health. For months she had been waiting to see her GP. For months she had been phoning up at 8 am and waiting until 9 am, only to be told yet again that there were no appointments available. Yet again, she would have to phone back another day. After months of waiting, her understandable anxiety about her health got too much for her, and she had to spend the limited savings available to her to see a GP privately, paying for something that should have been free to her at the point of use. This cannot be right.

Or take Steven and his family in Stewartby. They did everything right. They saved up, worked hard and bought the family home of their dreams on a nearby estate. But when mortgage rates rocketed up, their repayments went up by nearly £400 a month. That is an amount that no ordinary family can be expected to have to hand, and it meant that hard choices had to be made: holidays cancelled, enriching opportunities forgone and lives narrowed under the brutal reality of having to budget for an economic situation that was not of their making.

Or take Sarah and her daughter. Sarah had to wait for over a year just to have the authority recognise the need for her daughter to have an education and health assessment, and after that, she has been waiting over two years for the assessment to take place. Every day in the meantime she has to go through the heartbreak of seeing her daughter struggling in a school that is doing everything it can to support her but is being set up to fail.

The courage shown by all these families, and the determination they have shown in the face of adversity, should give all of us encouragement and hope for the future, but they cannot be expected to build that better future alone. They need their representative to speak up for them in this place, and they need the Government to act for them with the urgency that these challenges demand. Because every hour Margaret spent waiting on that phone line, filled with anxiety, is an hour that she is never getting back. Because every holiday cancelled and every opportunity forgone by Steven's family is a childhood memory that will never be made. Every day that Sarah's daughter goes to school and is unable to thrive is a day's potential that will be forever have been wasted. This is an urgency that I feel deeply and that I pledge to carry with me every day that I am lucky enough to serve my constituents in this House.

At a time when global and national challenges can be so wide ranging as to feel almost insurmountable, it is so important that our politicians remain bold in keeping hope alive. At a time when actors seek to exploit divisive and thorny issues to sow division among our communities, we need our politicians to stay principled and act with the integrity and good faith this House demands. At a time when the disruptive opportunities posed by the green transition and technological developments also bring with them understandable anxieties, we need our politicians not to run away from them but to be bold in bending those forces to the needs of our communities and seizing their benefits for our country.

I am under no illusion that I will face great challenges in living up to these principles in this place, but my door will always be open to anyone from right across the Chamber who is willing to work with me—and not just because of the number of times over the last few weeks that I have managed to lock myself out of my office. To those back home in Mid Bedfordshire, I would like to say thank you. Thank you for the positivity and warmth you showed me every day on the campaign trail. Thank you for the ideas and creativity you brought to me every month that filled me with such hope for the future. But most of all, thank you for the privilege of my life: the opportunity to serve you here as our MP.

3.4 pm

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I warmly commend the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) on what I thought was an excellent maiden speech. The movement has a funny way of delivering its ends these days, but I think it has come up with an excellent candidate in him and I wish him an enjoyable career in this place and serving his constituents. As he rightly says, it is the privilege of one's life to represent where you grew up and I know he is obviously very aware of that, and given that we have all had the opportunity to enjoy Mid Bedfordshire at length over recent months, I share his diagnosis of its charm.

It is an absolute privilege to open the Back-Bench speeches this afternoon on the main topic of our debate, because my community, like the hon. Gentleman's, is also looking for change. On Teesside, we need no lessons about the legacies of the last Labour Government. Frankly, we have had to live with them for too long: an industrial base abandoned; lives blighted by welfarism and low unemployment; and public services characterised by mediocrity and failure. This comes the week after British Steel announced that steelmaking is coming back to Teesside, which is a decision of huge significance for my local economy and follows a string of major successes, from the SeAH offshore wind factory, the new Net Zero Teesside power station and carbon capture and storage—all the things that our Mayor Ben Houchen, working together in lockstep with the Conservative Government, is helping to deliver for a part of the country that needs this success and opportunity.

I look forward to the autumn statement this week, and I welcome the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) to her position in my former bailiwick as Chief Secretary. The autumn statement represents an enormously important moment and all of us—on the Government side of the House at least—want to see pro-growth measures, the lowering of the tax burden when possible and a robust commitment not to take us back to the disastrous economic prescriptions of the Labour party. We have to recognise that it is at a time of global challenge here at home that we have some of the most important policy levers to improve our constituents' lives.

I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to act on leasehold and renters reform, but I also believe that we need to recognise the need in the housing sector for serious, sustained reconsideration of our planning laws if we are to ensure that the potential of this country is fulfilled. Ultimately, the honest truth is that we need to earn growth and not duck the fundamental

reasons why it is so lacklustre. Many of us were aghast at the decision last week to block a new, much-needed £2.5 billion datacentre on the site of an old quarry adjacent to the M25. It was blocked on the basis that it would

“harm the openness of the green belt”

and would have been visible from bridges over the motorway. This is madness. We can delude ourselves all we want about being a science superpower or a new silicon valley, but if we do not will the means, we will not secure the ends that this country needs to see.

Our crippling lack of predictable, secure land supply is testament to a wider political failure. That applies on a cross-party basis. Ultimately, one could point the finger at the Mayor of London and his dismal record on housing just as much as one could at my own side of the House, but we need to move forward on a cross-party basis at local and national Government levels to achieve a better system of planning. Ultimately, the current discretionary system is not delivering for my constituents or for my country, and I believe that a move, as the Growth Commission has suggested this morning, to a zonal planning system along the lines suggested by my right hon. Friend Boris Johnson when he was Prime Minister and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) when he was Secretary of State, would be the right thing to do.

Schroders has estimated that house prices are at their least affordable compared with earnings since '76. That is not the long hot summer of 1976 but 1876, the year Victoria became Empress of India. All our infrastructure capacity is being hamstrung by the underlying problem that we cannot build quickly enough where we need to. Roads, rail, data, energy and, most of all, good affordable homes are being delayed, made more expensive and in some cases being prevented entirely by this British disease.

Apart from the usual Westminster knockabout that a debate like this inevitably engenders, I think there is a serious point for Members across the House to consider, which is that there is a broken planning system at the heart of our society. Whether in central Bedfordshire or in Middlesbrough, we need to do more to make sure we can unlock growth, jobs, homes and opportunity.

Our politics deserves better and the public deserve better. This is not a right versus left issue; it is about growth versus stagnation, prosperity versus poverty or ambition versus relative decline. I hope that, over the months ahead, the Government will do much to take forward an ambitious agenda in this space.

3.10 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I pay tribute to the outstanding speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern). It was one of the very best maiden speeches I have heard in this House. It had humour and seriousness. He succinctly described his predecessor in a couple of sentences, and in one sentence he demonstrated his superior knowledge of football compared with the Foreign Secretary. Many people watching across the country will now be reflecting, “If that is the quality of representative we could get by voting for change, perhaps we will give it a go at the next general election, too.”

Housing was not mentioned in the King's Speech. We have a housing crisis in this country, and both sides of the House share an aspiration to build 300,000 homes a

year. I agree with the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Sir Simon Clarke) that we are not building enough homes—that is true—but who has just changed the planning system to take away housing targets from local areas? We will never get to 300,000 unless each area has its own housing targets that add up to that number.

A further problem is that we will never hit 300,000 through the private sector alone. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee produced a report four years ago saying that we need to provide at least 90,000 units of social housing through housing associations and councils. The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee is holding an inquiry now, and all the evidence shows that we simply do not have the resources.

There is a challenge for both Front Benches. We will have to find more money at some point to build more social housing in this country, both to get the numbers we need and to get the numbers that people can afford, as people cannot afford to go into the market to buy in the current circumstances. So many people have to save for years, even beyond retirement, for a deposit on a home. Rising mortgage costs are certainly not helping.

There was a promise to abolish section 21 notices in the private rented sector, but we are now told the Bill will wait until some future time—we do not know when—when the court system has been reformed. Yes, the court system needs to be reformed, and we ought to have a dedicated housing court, but the cost to local authorities of dealing with homelessness and temporary accommodation has risen by 50% in the last two years alone. That is due to section 21 notices, the local housing allowance freeze—many people cannot afford even to rent a home in the private sector—and the Government's asylum policy, which is all over the place and is putting great pressure on local authorities in some parts of the country to house people while they are having their asylum position confirmed. We have a massive challenge, and there is nothing in the King's Speech to deal with it.

We ought to address how we build homes for the future. Four years ago, the Government had a working party on modern construction methods, but they have forgotten about it. They have given up. I went to visit Lighthouse, a firm in my constituency that has just taken on 100 workers. The firm has doubled in size and is venturing into modern methods of construction for social housing. The Government should be encouraging that at national level, but there is nothing at all. There is no policy, no strategy and no plan for the future.

Levelling up was not mentioned in the King's Speech either. Germany saw the inequality across the country after reunification, so it had a 30-year programme. The inequality in this country is now as great as it was in Germany on reunification, yet all we have had is £4 billion in scattered pots of money for local authorities to bid for. There is no strategy and no long-term solutions.

Levelling up, again, appears to have been forgotten but, if we are to get our economy growing as a whole, we have to address the disparities in gross value added, productivity and income levels between different parts of the country. Productivity in the north of England is now lower than in the Czech Republic. GVA in our major cities is lower than the national average, which is completely different from what happens in Germany

[Mr Clive Betts]

and France. We need to get the whole country and the whole economy growing but, again, there is no plan, no strategy and no long-term future for this country.

There are one or two good things in the King's Speech, and I welcome them. We have not yet seen the details of the leasehold reforms, but certainly stopping the building of new leasehold houses and allowing people more easily to purchase their freehold are good measures that we need to implement as soon as possible. Addressing the problems of service charges and outrageous permission fees also needs to be in the Bill. I also welcome the proposals on football regulation. It is about getting a fairer distribution of funding and giving fans the legal right to be consulted on important things that affect their club; again, we will have to see the details.

Finally, I completely condemn Hamas's attack on innocent Israeli citizens, but I condemn just as strongly what Israel is now doing. The killing of innocent women, children and other civilians in Gaza is not acceptable and cannot continue as it is. I want to see a humanitarian pause and an end to the blockade to get aid into Gaza, and I want to see that as the basis for a ceasefire. A ceasefire cannot just be announced; both parties need to sit down and agree to one. That has to be done, and it has to be a stepping-stone to moving forward to a two-state solution: safety for Israel and a free Palestine, free of Israeli occupation. That is what we should be moving towards.

3.16 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) to her new post. Her promotion is richly deserved.

One thing on which I am sure we can all agree in this House is the need to create non-inflationary growth in this country. The question is how we go about it and, to some extent, how we define it. I say to my hon. Friend that gross domestic product, as a measure of growth, is becoming an increasingly less relevant index in our economy because, although economic growth has been low across the western economies, balance sheets and net worth have tripled; there is a dislocation there.

GDP needs to take domestic unpaid labour, such as child or elderly care, into account. It excludes a huge proportion of what happens online, as well as intangibles such as intellectual property, and is much less suited to a service economy than to a manufacturing economy. It also has the perverse incentive of making us want to encourage immigration, rather than discourage it. When we have the wrong analysis, we are likely to have the wrong targets and, ultimately, the wrong policy. That needs to change. We need to concentrate on wealth creation, which happens when we take unique IP from any of us and turn it into a good or service that does not currently exist, or into a better good or service than exists today.

We have a problem that, in a capitalist economy, we cannot get that sort of wealth creation if there is not sufficient access to capital. One problem in the UK is that 85% of company scale-ups here are done with bank lending and 15% are done with private equity, whereas it is 80:20 in the other direction in the United States. We need to have deeper and wider access to private equity

and venture capital in this country if we are to maximise the benefits of our hugely creative and innovative population, and if we are to stop the IP leakage, especially to the United States.

We also need to create more wealth by improving our share of global trade, by which I mean the share of global markets that are expanding fastest, and not our obsession with the European Union. The latest Institute of Economic Affairs report shows that trade continued to grow between 2016 and the conclusion of the Brexit transition in 2020, indicating that Brexit had no main effect on trade. UK goods exports rose by 13.5% to EU countries and by 14.3% to non-EU countries between 2019 and 2022, so we need to put that issue behind us and instead focus on the world's growing markets. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecast said that Brexit barriers would result in a 15% drop in trade volumes, contributing to a 4% lower GDP in the long run, and that is already clearly wrong. I ask those on the Government Front Bench to request from the OBR a much more updated and realistic assessment of where our trade sits at the present time.

Contrary to what many people will perceive, and certainly to what the Labour party will tend to suggest, 82.5% of all the jobs in this country are in the private sector and only 17.5% are in the public sector. From listening to our media and politicians, we would often think this was 50:50. Some 61% of those private sector jobs are in small and medium-sized enterprises. I know that if we are able to cut taxes, many of my colleagues will want to see personal taxes cut, but our priority should be to cut taxes for small businesses, because they are the ones that create prosperity and employment. They are the mainstay of our economy. In particular, I would like to see more Government action on late payment, particularly by local authorities; this is taxpayers' money that should be getting through to SMEs on time, and the fact that it is not is a scandal. I would also like to see the retail, hospitality and leisure business rates discount extended to give many of the companies struggling in that sector the help they require.

We also need to look at other elements, including the broadband infrastructure in our country. Constituencies like mine still contain places with no broadband. It is ridiculous that we are putting public money into the programme and yet leaving parts of our economy without any of the advantages they require to participate fully in our economy. We were told that we would get that broadband at the end of 2022 and then we were told it would be in spring 2023. It was then to be October 2023, and now we have no idea when we will get it. I say to the Minister that the Treasury needs to give a kick up the proverbial to other Departments to make sure they are carrying out the promises that the Government made at the last election to stop some of the limitations in the rural economy and to get that infrastructure in place.

Finally, I want to say a quick word about the Bank of England. It has operational independence, but where is the accountability? We were told that inflation would be transitory and that there were external influences involved. I looked at the letters between the Governor of the Bank of England and the Chancellor, and not once did they mention monetary stability or the fact that we had had an expansion of our money supply for far too long, at far too great a level. These are not rounding errors. If

we get extra inflation created by monetary expansion that is too fast, it will affect the poorest in our society and the balance of our public finances, and it will cost taxpayers money. I have no problem with the Bank of England having operational independence, but what I want to know is: when it gets it wrong, who is it accountable to? Ultimately, it is the taxpayers and the people of this country who pay the bill, not those who are well paid in the Bank of England.

3.22 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): After 13 tortuous years, the policy programme in the King's Speech reaffirms once more that this Conservative Government are out of ideas and out of time. Unfortunately, the resurrection of a former Prime Minister will not save them here. Given Lord Cameron's disregard for standards in public life, which included dubious dealings during the covid pandemic on behalf of Lex Greensill, who is still being investigated by the Serious Fraud Office, it says a lot that the Prime Minister is prepared to appoint him despite that.

The Prime Minister needs to take responsibility for the consequences of 13 years of regressive economic policies and economic mismanagement, which have led to a flatlining economy and the misery that so many people are facing in this cost of living crisis. Over the past 13 years, we have seen inequalities widen, as covid has so cruelly exposed and amplified. Once again, we have seen the north-south health divide revealed, with 17% more covid deaths in the north than in the rest of England. Some here will recall the Black report in 1982, which was quickly followed by the health divide report in 1984, where for the first time the extent of the north-south health divide was revealed.

Some 40 years on, the same thing has been allowed to happen again under yet more Conservative Governments. It did not just happen; Professor Sir Michael Marmot warned us about this in 2010, 2016 and early 2020 in his various reports about the UK's declining life expectancy, which was driven by socioeconomic inequalities. He made very sensible recommendations to address the situation but, again, where were those in this King's Speech?

Worryingly, recent analysis found that a deprived area in the north of England had a higher level of covid deaths compared with an equally deprived area in the south; there was an "amplification of deprivation" effect. Contrary to levelling up the country, this Government have not learned any lessons from covid and why the north was worse affected than the south, or why people on the lowest incomes, those who were disabled and those who were from an ethnic minority community were more likely to get sick and die. As the Northern Health Science Alliance's recent report shows, the implications of these regional health inequalities on the economy are vast. Before the pandemic, people in the north were living, on average, two years less than people in the rest of England. In addition to living shorter lives, they were living in poorer health for longer, were at increased risk of losing their job because of that ill health, and were put on lower wages if and when they returned to work.

The NHTA estimates that £13.2 billion a year would be added to regional GDP if the health of the population in the north was equivalent to that of the rest of England,

as a result of improved productivity. The disproportionate ill health that people experience in the north reflects decades of under-investment there after the decline of many traditional industries, the ensuing poverty and inequality that accompanied that, and the fact that this has persisted over many generations. Where was the cross-departmental working to ensure health in all policies in the King's Speech? Where is the joined-up working with the devolved nations and regions? Where are the fair funding formulae, not just for the NHS but for education, local authorities and public services as a whole?

Economic inactivity across the UK has stayed at about 21 % for a number of years, with a short blip in 2022, with covid. The Government's response to that should not be to penalise people who are sick or disabled by withdrawing even more social security support, for example, through sanctions or cuts to universal credit, as was reported yesterday, but to provide the right type of support for people in the right way. I am calling on the Chancellor to ensure that he increases social security support by at least inflation. I also hope he listens to the many charities in this area, including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trussell Trust and the Child Poverty Action Group, and supports an essentials guarantee pegging UC to the cost of basic essentials. Without that, I fear that the 200 claimant deaths that the Department for Work and Pensions has investigated over the past three years, which we know are the tip of the iceberg, will increase.

The Prime Minister said he wanted to lead a compassionate Government; ensuring a compassionate social security system that will help to reduce the poverty and inequality that millions are experiencing is just one example of how he can do that. The absence of this compassion for our fellow citizens, and indeed for our brothers and sisters overseas, is revealing uncomfortable truths about the attitudes of some to our common humanity. We believe that as human beings we are all equal, with equal rights, as set out in the universal declaration of human rights. It is evident not just in the covid inquiry, but every day in foreign and domestic policy, and in the policy programme in this King's Speech, which embeds rather than tackles inequality, that for this Government some people are more equal than others.

3.28 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to contribute to the debate. I congratulate His Majesty on delivering the King's Speech last week, following in the footsteps of his late, great mother and undertaking his constitutional duties to Parliament and our country. I also wish him a happy birthday today.

With the autumn statement just eight days away, it is clear that we need to see ambitious fiscal measures introduced to complement the economic growth provisions outlined in the King's Speech. Tackling inflation has rightly been one of the Government's priorities: we understand the corrosive effects of inflation on the economy, economic growth and households around the country. We need the rate to fall further, to manageable levels, but we must also increase supply through reforms and lower business costs to ultimately help bring down inflation.

[Priti Patel]

There are many measures I would like to touch on in the time I have available. One, which I spoke about earlier this year, is the 5p reduction in fuel duty that the Chancellor maintained in the spring, which was incredibly welcome. Such measures are essential, as they can make a huge difference to households and businesses across the country. Against an inflationary backdrop—although we know it is decreasing—this matters because it helps to bring costs down across the whole economy and, importantly, can help businesses and motorists. I say that as an MP from Essex, where we are proud of white van man and where drivers come into London, in particular. Let us not forget that there are other pressures on motorists in London because of the additional burdens they now face, such as the ultra low emission zone.

Alongside that, there is the issue of business rates, which I often speak about. They are a fixed cost to businesses, but actually impede growth on our high streets. As we know, our high streets and town centres are struggling for many reasons. If addressed in a considered way by Government, a freeze in the business rates multiplier can help small businesses and firms to keep their costs down. I press the Government to maintain the freeze in the multiplier and look at reforms to lower the cost burden of business rates, which is having such a corrosive impact.

Some 80% of my constituents are employed by SMEs, which is 20% higher than the national average. We are very proud of that. Essex is an entrepreneurial county and we are risk takers. We like running our own businesses and being self-employed, but that means that the share of the burden on those smaller businesses is much higher. As Conservatives in government, we must always look to tackle that.

To return to my other favourite subject, the Government are aware of my concerns about the OECD plans for minimum levels of corporation tax and the way the Government are rolling them out. I fundamentally maintain the position I have taken on this issue, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer has given me assurances over the assessment and analysis that will be carried out of its impact. We touched on this during discussions about the Finance (No. 2) Act 2023, but those measures will make our country less competitive. They will have an overall impact on businesses, foreign direct investment and investment in our country, so I will want to press Ministers on the reviews of them going forward.

I also maintain my position on income tax. The tax system needs to be simplified and fairer, and we need to reduce the burdens on families and businesses, including levels of personal taxation. One of the core missions of the Conservative party is to support economic freedom and liberty by cutting taxes, ensuring people can keep more of what they earn and encouraging the development of a property-owning democracy, which has been a topic of discussion in the Chamber this afternoon.

Universally, we in this Chamber know we need reforms on planning and that we need to do more on social housing, as well as growing housing across the country in a sustainable and suitable way. People are struggling and the cost of owning property, or even getting a foot on the housing ladder, is astronomical, so we need to do more. I could go on to other statistics, but in the interest of time I will raise another couple of local issues.

In Essex, we are crying out for infrastructure investment. I will happily write business cases to the Treasury on dualling the A120 and expanding the A12. We have had a tremendously successful programme of investment on the great eastern main line because of a business case that went to the Treasury 12 years ago. We are proud of that, and that growth is now paying off.

I want to press the case on pylons and the Winsor review. In Essex, we have concerns, which the Treasury must listen to, about the implications of the review. I support the wider measures on energy production and the introduction of the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill, but more needs to be done.

To conclude, I welcome the framework of measures, but we have to look at the detail on supporting supply-side reform, lowering taxes for businesses, making sure our economy grows in a sustainable way and dealing with the challenges of inflation, so that we ensure our economy grows for decades to come.

3.34 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The King's Speech opened with an aspiration to raise economic growth, but was devoid of a single clue to how the Government intend to achieve that. There is nothing about a skills development strategy, nothing to address declining apprenticeship numbers for 16 to 18-year-olds, and nothing on the investment required to get Britain working again. The Chancellor now wants us to believe that all will be put right in the autumn statement—methinks we're going to need a bigger statement. The Government foisted Brexit on us without a plan to implement it, so what does the Prime Minister do in his hour of need? He brings back the planless man whose reckless behaviour caused so much difficulty. It is like Oliver Hardy asking Stanley for help.

At 6.7%, inflation is still a long way from the 2% target, with little evidence that Government action, rather than commodity price reductions, is accounting for the limited progress that we have seen. In fact, the interest rate rises forced on the Bank of England are more likely to damage business and living standards. Increased mortgages will cost UK households £9 billion over this year and next.

How will we raise economic growth with a Government who cannot even secure our ability to produce our own steel? Some 2,000 jobs are at risk in Scunthorpe while the Government do nothing. Just how safe and secure should anyone feel with a Government who have entrusted our steelmaking to the Chinese?

Last year, this country experienced what happens when Governments speculate with unfunded tax plans. There is always a price to pay when gamblers lose control, but it is the British people who are paying that price with wrecked living standards. The behaviour of the Conservative party has destroyed the prospects of families the length and breadth of this country. When will the Government take responsibility for the misery that they have caused? This is a Government of 25 tax rises, but what do we have to show for it? We have crumbling schools, an NHS on its knees, crime out of control, living standards plummeting and even life expectancy falling in 21st-century Tory Britain. The truth is that virtually nothing works anymore. There is hardly a family in the land, apart from the covid profiteers,

who can claim to be better off than they were 13 years ago. Just think what we could do with the estimated £7.2 billion of fraudulent covid payments over which this Prime Minister presided and which this Government are prepared to write off.

Lest it appears that I think there is nothing of benefit in this King's Speech, I welcome action to curtail drip pricing and subscription traps, which I hope will eventually be delivered via the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill. It is long overdue.

It is time that online businesses paid their fair share of taxes. It is time to breathe new life into our high streets by abandoning outdated business rates, and—I say this in Respect for Shopworkers Week—cracking down on retail crime, which, according to new research from Thruvision and Retail Economics, will reach £7.9 billion this year. It is turning shops into dangerous work environments and no-go areas for too many customers.

Let us think of the possibilities for jobs, growth and wealth creation in life sciences, creative industries, the green economy and financial services if only we had a Government who knew the value of an industrial strategy and were prepared to secure the necessary investments. Instead, we have a Government who make us a laughing stock over their inability to build a modern railway, and manage to let HS2 end up £30 billion over budget. Just who will be called to account for that incompetence?

I want to be able to offer hope to the brilliant Kath's Café in Druids Heath as it struggles with increasing supply costs and customers' declining living standards, to Cameron-Price, a great local manufacturing business that is toiling to find the skilled workers it needs, and to Loaf organic bakery, a popular and entrepreneurial venture, but without any Government support in the face of crippling electricity costs. We need a King's Speech to offer hope to the homeless, to support well-paid jobs, to tackle the mental health crisis and to address the gangs and the scourge of antisocial behaviour disfiguring our communities. We need a King's Speech to get Britain working again. This is not it.

3.40 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to her new position. Last week we were all allowed to see the historic spectacle of the King giving his first speech to this House. There are many historic spectacles associated with the speech, and today, entertainingly, the shadow Chancellor played her role, which is to claim that nothing has ever gone right with the Government and that there is nothing in the King's Speech at all.

Of course, on bald numbers the shadow Chancellor is wrong, because it is clear that since 2010 the UK has had the third-highest growth in the G7 and 3.9 million more people are employed. However, that does not mean that growth should not be a priority, especially given the long-term supply-side shocks this economy has had from covid and the current crisis in Ukraine—although that seems to be forgotten at the moment—causing other energy shocks. It is therefore encouraging that the preoccupation of the King's Speech and of this Government is to promote economic growth.

It is right to start by talking about supporting the Bank of England in taking measures that will reduce inflation. Inflation is economically corrosive, and it is

the job of Governments to be financially responsible. When inflation is stable at lower levels, we see the encouragement of personal savings, which is a benefit, we see less pressure for people from what is described as the cost of living, and we see businesses investing. It reduces some of the inefficiencies that economists talk about and rigidity in the economy. It is key that we take measures and encourage the Bank of England to bring down inflation in order to have higher growth.

One such measure is to ensure that, for the next part of the 21st century, we look at the industries that both the Government and the private sector can foster so that we see sustained economic growth. The United Kingdom has the chance to be the world leader in many high-tech industries. The shadow Chancellor was right to welcome what the Government did in the spring statement with 100% expensing; it is the right thing to do, because it encourages businesses to invest. However, we can make it permanent only if we do away with some of the grants and take other actions to make it fiscally neutral, and it is of more benefit if it does not go only into plant and machinery. I urge the Government to look at a system that allows research-intensive industries to put research and development costs into full expensing as well.

The industries of the future were mentioned in the King's Speech. I welcome the measures that we will see and discuss in the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill and the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill. Another industry of the future in which we must ensure that we remain a world leader, having been a world leader in it for the last 40 years, is the car industry. We must do more to encourage the electric vehicle industry. There are some simple measures that the Government could enact to encourage more people to take up electric vehicles. The first is the stabilisation and equalisation of VAT, so that people charging their vehicles in a public or a private place pay the same rate. The second is to put a presumption on local authorities to have byelaws permitting safety gullies, to allow charging by those who do not have access to their own off-street parking. Those are simple things that the Government will do to encourage growth.

The Government rightly recognise the importance of the quality of infrastructure and getting more people to invest in it. One thing that was not in the King's Speech but is being circulated is the new rail reform Bill. I welcome some of the measures in that Bill, but we will need to look again at it because there is far too much emphasis on what the public sector does, and not enough on what the private sector could do—it could do more.

I welcome, and hope to see more use of, initiatives such as the Mansion House compact. I encourage the Government to think about how first-time buyers could use their pension funds to fund deposits, using something similar to what we have with self-invested personal pensions, which allow people to take out 25% tax free.

Economic growth for everybody across the world is difficult to achieve at the moment, but there are measures in the King's Speech—as, I have no doubt, there will be in next week's autumn statement—that will allow that growth to prosper. I welcome the King's Speech.

3.45 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The question that all our constituents are asking is: "Is that it? After 13 years, is that all this Government have to offer?" This

[Stella Creasy]

is a King's Speech so pointless that it could be an answer on the game show. It comes from a Prime Minister who is acting like one of the contestants on "I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!"—desperate to do anything to stay in charge.

Frankly, our constituents deserve better. Many Members have spoken about the deep-seated challenges in our country, such as the lack of growth. After 13 years of this Government, we have a society in which the bank of mum and dad determines outcomes, not talent. In the last decade alone, housing and stocks and shares have earned far more than any hard work or effort that our constituents could undertake, because of sluggish productivity and the Government's failure to invest in our communities.

Our kids cannot get apprenticeships; they are struggling to stay in university. [Interruption.] The Minister is shaking her head. I invite her to come and meet my local residents, who beg me for apprenticeships. They are still reeling from the impact of the pandemic. They are scarred by where they live and who their parents are, because that is what determines their outcomes. It is a mark of shame for us that we live in a country in which the exam results of black children are, on average, almost 10% lower than those of their white counterparts. Nothing is changing any time soon, and the King's Speech will do little.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) set out the housing crisis. When I see the other crises that we are facing, I suppose I should be careful what I wish for, because when faced with the climate crisis, the Government's response is to go hard on fossil fuels rather than recognising that renewables are cheaper and that, if we are to tackle both the cost of living crisis and the climate crisis, we should put those things together rather than asking our communities to choose.

Of course, nothing in the King's Speech deals with the elephant in the room that is Brexit. I am sad that the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) is no longer in his place after his valiant attempt to claim that Brexit has had a positive impact on our country and communities. The economic data suggests otherwise, so let me give him some other figures. Eurostat figures show that exports have fallen by 14% in the last year and that UK to EU trade of goods is down 16%. European Central Bank research shows that 77% of firms in this country say that the Brexit deal is not helping their sales. Indeed, our constituents are facing a £250 surcharge on their food bills alone.

The King's Speech could have dealt with the fact that, in the coming year, Brexit's impact on inflation will get a lot worse. Our constituents will face a £43-a-time charge on anything imported into the UK. Food will get more expensive—not my words but those of the Government's own record. There will a £10 charge to enter the UK. What will that do to our stuttering tourism industry, which is trying to recover after the pandemic? The King's Speech is silent on all those challenges, and tries to suggest that trade through the CPTPP will make up for the trade lost on our doorstep.

The King's Speech offers a Criminal Justice Bill, which I welcome. It is time that we finally sorted out the inequality that means that my Walthamstow constituents

have fewer human rights when it comes to choosing to have an abortion than constituents in Belfast. Sentencing guidelines will not deal with the fact that hundreds of women are now being prosecuted under outdated abortion legislation. It is time for decriminalisation, and perhaps one of the few positive things we can do in the year to come is to sort that.

I wish to correct the record. Earlier I said that in the time it has taken for the Government to fail to do anything about buy now, pay later lenders, the number of people borrowing from these companies has doubled—it has actually tripled. Forty per cent of people who are borrowing from buy now, pay later companies say they are in direct financial difficulty because of it, and these companies are benefiting from the Government's failure to regulate them. I care as much about legal loan sharks in the private sector as I do about those in the public sector. The regulation of these companies is long overdue, and if this Government does not do it, waiting for a Labour Government to do it will mean another year and another explosion in the millions of people borrowing from them.

In the next year, we will see a crisis in our childcare industry, because the Government have pushed up the cost of childcare without providing the subsidy for it. We need to go further. It is not just about providing high-quality childcare; it is about helping every family to make the choices they want. Only 5% of dads report taking shared parental leave, because our shared parental leave system does not work; it asks the mum's employer to pay the costs, rather than sharing them. Some 80% of dads say they do not have enough time with their kids as a result. These are challenges that we could deal with, but this King's Speech will do nothing to solve them.

As I said, public sector legal loan sharks need to be dealt with, too. In the next year alone, private finance initiative deals will cost this country £9.8 billion in repayments. PFI is something that all Governments have used, and we need to tackle it. We have £200 billion-worth of commitments coming our way—money that could be going back into our public services if we fought for a better deal for our taxpayers.

What we are seeing is small responses to big challenges, not least to the biggest challenge of all, which is the uncertainty and conflict around the world. Everybody in this Chamber wants the bloodshed to stop in Israel and Gaza. Everybody in this Chamber, I hope, stands with people like my constituent whose parent has been kidnapped by Hamas and wants to see them returned and to see the dismantling of Hamas as a terrorist organisation. A humanitarian pause would require the same type of negotiation as a ceasefire. Let us stand together with our international partners and put pressure on those partners who can put pressure on Hamas to get people round the table. Let us challenge Israel to stand up for international humanitarian law, and let us stop the bloodshed. This King's Speech does nothing to achieve that, but it could have done.

3.52 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on the King's Speech. It was poignant to attend the House of Lords last week to hear His Majesty's first King's Speech. It is perhaps appropriate that this debate takes place on Charles III's 75th birthday, and we all wish him a very happy day indeed.

At the beginning of this Parliament, almost four years ago, I do not think anyone could have predicted the events that would unfold after just a few months, with the global covid-19 pandemic. It is quite remarkable and not by accident that the UK economy has had one of the fastest and strongest recoveries of any in Europe, including Germany and France, and elsewhere in the world, including Japan. I welcome the investment of over £20 billion a year in research and development. It is no accident that this country is decarbonising and reaching our 2050 net zero carbon emission goals more than any other country in the G7.

I welcome the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill, which was announced in the King's Speech. Yesterday evening, the New Zealand high commissioner was here in Parliament. I welcome the trans-Pacific partnership, which truly is a demonstration of global Britain and global reach post Brexit.

We are an island trading nation, and that is why economic growth has to be supported by a thriving British aviation sector. It has suffered hugely as a result of the pandemic but is coming back extremely strongly. I am delighted that later this month, Virgin Atlantic Airways, which is headquartered in my constituency, will be flying the first ever 100% sustainable aviation fuel flight, transatlantic from London to New York. However, we need to do more to support the sustainable aviation fuels industry, which has the potential to create over 100,000 jobs in this country. It is better for our economic and energy security to produce SAF here in the United Kingdom than to be reliant on importing it from abroad, with all the expense involved.

Another area in which we could boost our economic growth would be to use a Brexit freedom to introduce duty-free shopping on arrivals. Most of the rest of the world does so: parts of Europe that are not in the European Union have introduced duty-free shopping, including Norway and Switzerland, as have many other countries around the world. It is a freedom that we should be using. It would not cost the Treasury any lost revenue, but it would onshore those sales to UK shops and create employment.

Turning to animal welfare issues, I very much welcome the livestock exports Bill. Live animal exports for slaughter and fattening have not taken place for a number of years, but certainly in the past, that was an extremely cruel practice that caused great distress to animals who were trafficked over long distances to meet a very sad end. It is very good that that practice will come to an end in law, so that it can no longer take place. That is another Brexit animal welfare benefit, and something that my late mum would have been very pleased about. Many years ago, she often used to write to her local MP calling for an end to live animal exports. It is great that that is now being achieved.

Finally, a manifesto commitment that the Conservative party made four years ago and that featured in most of the main parties' political manifestos, was the banning of trophy hunting imports—the import of endangered species' body parts into Great Britain. In the last Session, I tabled such a ban in the form of a private Member's Bill, but unfortunately that Bill was filibustered, blocked and eventually timed out by a very small number of peers—one of them a hereditary peer—in the other place. The ban passed this elected House unanimously, has widespread public support and was a Government

commitment. If the Minister wants to intervene on me to say that the Government will bring forward that legislation in this Session, I would be delighted. I understand that she probably does not have that brief in front of her, but hopefully the Government can confirm that they will legislate in Government time to achieve that manifesto commitment, end what is a very cruel practice, and lead the world further in animal welfare measures.

3.57 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this King's Speech debate on securing economic growth; I only wish the Government had offered us something in His Majesty's Gracious Speech that would turn that vision into a reality. This Conservative Government have wrecked the economy, and they continue to make everyone else pay for it. They have given tax breaks to big banks and the oil and gas giants while the rest of us have suffered higher taxes, higher mortgage bills and spiralling inflation. The King's Speech revealed a Government with absolutely no interest in tackling the cost of living crisis. There was nothing to address food price inflation, nor to support struggling households with their soaring mortgage payments, and it ignored the need to protect the most vulnerable from high energy bills this winter.

If there is one thing that all parts of the political spectrum can agree on, it is that the UK needs to grow its economy. Under the Conservatives, so much of the UK's potential is going untapped, with anaemic growth, weaker investment and falling living standards. Years of stagnating growth look set to persist, with the most recent figures showing that our economy has flatlined, as household budgets are squeezed by higher interest rates. It could not be clearer that the Government's approach has failed.

Unprecedented economic challenges have only been compounded by a Conservative Government who have no cohesive economic strategy, and who have chopped and changed time after time. A perfect example is the Prime Minister's decision to row back on crucial green commitments—a decision that not only jeopardises our fight against climate change and keeps families stuck in draughty homes paying higher energy bills, but destroys the certainty that businesses need to invest in a greener future. It moves the goalposts, throwing into question carefully crafted business plans. What a colossal wasted opportunity for the climate, green growth and new jobs, and this is yet more proof that this Government do not have a plan—not for our planet or for our economy.

If the UK is to keep up with our international partners, we urgently need to restore business confidence and boost investment in growth industries. At the heart of the Liberal Democrat plan to achieve this is an ambitious industrial strategy, which would co-ordinate policy across key areas and set strategic objectives, such as supercharging green technologies, creating good local jobs and boosting international trade. It would create stability, give the private sector clear investment signals and revitalise business conditions by equipping our workforce with the skills it needs, investing in key infrastructure, encouraging the adoption of digital technology and creating financial markets that truly work for all businesses. Yet at every opportunity, the Government refuse to set a clear direction of travel or to implement a cohesive long-term industrial strategy, and this King's Speech was no different.

[Sarah Olney]

One piece of legislation I was pleased to see is the Pedicabs (London) Bill, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) on all her work in securing this commitment from the Government. This Bill will create a regulatory framework for rickshaws. While the intention for this legislation may be to control the unruly service that operates in central London, I believe that rickshaws could be a real game changer for those in my constituency and elsewhere who cannot access active travel. This could be a particular benefit as an interim transport solution across Hammersmith bridge, which has been closed to motor traffic for almost five years. I was pleased to meet the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) when she was a Minister in the Department for Transport to discuss the potential opportunities for rickshaws in my constituency. Now that the Bill has finally been introduced, I would welcome a further meeting with the Department for Transport to discuss the possibility for Hammersmith bridge and the surrounding areas to run a pilot scheme for a new licensed pedicab service.

Of the 21 Bills offered in this King's Speech, there was not a single piece of legislation to tackle the crisis facing our NHS and nothing to ensure that the 7.8 million people on waiting lists can access treatment. Mental health is one of the top issues in my constituency, and I know that many of my constituents are deeply disappointed that plans to reform the Mental Health Act 1983 have seemingly been scrapped. My constituents were also looking to the King's Speech to provide a solution to the sewage crisis polluting our waterways, but it completely fails to introduce measures that would stop water companies pumping sewage into rivers and oceans, and it fails to introduce a new tougher water regulator to hold water companies to account.

In my constituency of Richmond Park, Thames Water has become synonymous with poor-quality work and dubious environmental practices. Alongside failing to attend burst water mains for days and taking weeks to repair relatively simple issues, the company is spending millions on a project intended to replace water from the River Thames near Ham and Petersham with highly treated sewage in times of drought. Given the company's history of frustrating business practices and an appalling environmental record, how are my constituents supposed to trust Thames Water to do its job? How will the Government ensure that the agencies responsible for monitoring Thames Water have the powers needed to hold it to account?

I hope that the King, on his 75th birthday today, has received some decent gifts and is enjoying a special day, because I am afraid that his Government have nothing to offer the families and businesses across the UK that are crying out for change. There is no plan for economic growth, no plan to protect our natural environment and no plan to tackle the crisis facing our NHS. This shows a Government that are out of ideas and will soon be out of time.

4.3 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): This afternoon, I thought I would revert to my role as a one-woman tourist board for North Devon, home to the only cold

water surf reserve in the world and the UK's only world surf reserve. With stunning beaches alongside beautiful countryside and magnificent moors, there really is something for everyone who wants to get a bit of the great outdoors.

Hospitality in North Devon contributes over a quarter of a billion pounds to the economy. Indeed, our local economy is hugely reliant on our tourism and hospitality sectors. The pandemic saw a surge in people enjoying a staycation and visiting previously unseen parts of the UK. However, this year has seen a 20% drop in visitor numbers, in part as these visitors head to overseas destinations again, but the sector is also struggling to recruit staff, with many venues open for only part of the week, unfortunately driven in part by the huge surge in short-term holiday lets alongside a rush of second home owners.

I have two pleas to the Treasury: to keep the business rate discounts, as swathes of hospitality businesses are set to close their doors this January if discounts are reduced, and to reverse the Osborne tax reforms and level the tax playing field between long term and short-term rentals, to help resolve some of our housing and, hence, staffing challenges. During an economic downturn, we all know that eating and drinking out is one of the first things to go, so I say to those of us in North Devon and beyond: let us support our local pubs and restaurants this winter.

But I fear that there is more at play. I know from speaking to beach managers and surf schools that far too many people visiting our beautiful beaches are fearful of the sea, despite eight of the 11 bathing beaches in North Devon having excellent water quality and being among the cleanest beaches in the world. I know that that phrase makes opposition councillors rush home to write complaints about me to the local paper, but it is true. The so-called "sewage scandal" so loved by opposition parties is not what is happening to North Devon's beaches.

Yes, when it rains, a lot of the storm overflows run—they are mostly rainwater—but less than 1% of the water pollution in North Devon comes from human sewage. These overflows have run for more than a century; we only know about this now because they are monitored. In North Devon, much work has already been done to hold water further up the catchment and to reduce the impact of heavy rains, as well as installing extra storage capacity to reduce the frequency of storm discharges. Yes, there is more to do, but it is vital to those businesses along the coast, and everyone who wants to enjoy our stunning beaches, to recognise that North Devon's beaches have already undergone huge improvements, and the water quality is significantly better than it was 20 years ago. Indeed, even Surfers Against Sewage, whose app generates more content in my inbox than anything else, conceded in writing to me this month:

"With regards to the beaches in your constituency, we totally agree that huge improvements have been made to water quality there".

Yes, there will always be more to do, but I wish the opposition parties would not talk down North Devon.

Lib Dems called for sewage to be tackled in the King's Speech. They clearly failed to turn up, as they so often do, when we passed the Environment Act 2021, which is the reason we are monitoring and know where the real problems are. Anti-business rhetoric from Lib

Dems is so damaging in a constituency such as mine. A Lib Dem council runs our biggest town, Barnstaple, which has a very busy high street, for a whole host of reasons, not least the great range of fabulous independent retailers alongside big brand names. But it is being held back because the council has not prioritised reopening the bus station. I have had complaints for over a year about the lack of toilet facilities and shelter. Rural bus journeys into town are long. The council is paid by bus companies to run the station, but it chooses to spend that money on business rates rather than on providing the commercial services that travellers need. I know that the plan is to sell it to the town council and open a community centre, which is very lovely, but there is a local coffee shop owner who is interested in opening a café. Why cannot we do something more commercial?

Our hospitality sector and, indeed, virtually every business I visit, as well as all our public services, cannot recruit staff because there is nowhere to live for working-age families. I attribute that to the failings of the Lib Dem-run council to get to grips with planning. The council officer staff work flat out to deliver the plans that are put together, but where is the Lib Dem vision for Barnstaple to thrive and improve its economic output? Where are the affordable homes that we so desperately need?

Yes, Government money is coming to help redevelop the high street and rebuild the hospital and its vital staff accommodation, but more commercial thinking is needed at a local level. Our Lib Dem council leader advised the BBC that I was electioneering when I suggested reopening the bus station. Fortunately, the council staff at the town council recognise the need for a bus station, as does everyone else I talk to. We need our businesses to thrive. We need to support them and provide the right associated facilities for shoppers to make long journeys into town, taking advantage of the Government's £2 bus fare, which is a huge saving for long rural journeys.

While I work locally to help resolve some of these matters, I very much hope that more people will contribute to North Devon's local economic growth. If they have not booked their next staycation, I can highly recommend my beautiful constituency. North Devon is a jewel in our country's tourism crown, and this Conservative Government will continue to support it, not talk it down.

4.9 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is an honour and a privilege to represent the people of Newcastle upon Tyne Central. It is the city I grew up in and, quite simply, the best place in the world. My question in this King's Speech debate is: why are the Government letting Newcastle down?

Replacing the woman actually elected to lead his party, the Prime Minister promised to get the economy growing, but the IMF now forecasts that our country will have the lowest growth in the G7 next year, yet taxes are at their highest rate since 1949. What are my constituents paying for? It is not a better health service, better schools or safer streets; we are paying for Tory failure. This King's Speech does nothing to change that.

I suppose it should not be surprising that an old Harrovian failed Prime Minister thinks the answer is an old Etonian failed Prime Minister, but it is not.

That Tory failure will continue in my constituency. I see it on the doorstep, at my surgeries and on our streets, with young people trying to get on the housing ladder, but held back by Tory Britain's systemic failure to build. We have businesses contending with inflation, as well as the scourge of late payments. We have pensioners choosing between heating and eating. Less than half of children in England saw a dentist in the past year. We have supermarket security tags on half a pound of butter. Some 42% of children in my constituency are growing up in poverty, 17% of households are in fuel poverty and almost one fifth of adults in Newcastle are estimated to be in problematic debt.

It is little wonder that this year, the citizens advice bureau in Newcastle is on course to help more people with crisis support, food bank referrals and charitable support than in any other year on record. Behind each statistic, there is a living family. One example from Newcastle City Council's cost of living helpline is of an adult with two children. The parent has not eaten anything for three days, saving food so that the kids can eat. There is no gas and no electricity. They are going to warm places in the city to spend the day and wrapping up in multiple layers at night. That is impacting on the mental health of everyone in the family. This is Newcastle in 2023 under the Tories. This is the human cost of Tory economic chaos.

I am immensely proud of our local food banks such as West End food bank, Newcastle United supporters trust food bank and Kenton food bank. I am proud of the work of our council, and I am proud of the work of all the charities helping Geordies to survive, but it should not have to be this way. Newcastle's wonderful industrial heritage inspired me to go into engineering. Whether it is renewable energy, life sciences, start-ups or innovative manufacturing, Newcastle has exciting prospects for the industries of the future and a green industrial manufacturing future. In our long-standing areas of strength, such as our world-renowned hospitality sector, which adds more than £300 million of GVA each year in my constituency, I can see enormous potential for growth, helped by Labour's plans on business rates, energy markets and the planning system.

Labour has a plan to make people across the whole country better off by growing the economy, boosting wages and bringing down bills. Our industrial strategy would bring together our excellent universities, skilled workforce and deep capital markets to turbocharge growth in constituencies such as mine. Our planning reforms would make it possible to build the infrastructure we need, and switching on Great British Energy would bring down bills, create hundreds of thousands of high-paid jobs and put the UK on course towards energy independence.

The record speaks for itself. People in Newcastle upon Tyne Central would be better off with Labour. Under the Tories, disposable income is forecast to grow by just £42 between 2010 and 2025. Under Labour, it grew by £11,000 per person. The Tories low-growth, high-tax economy has meant hardship and setbacks for my constituents. We need a Labour Government and a Labour King's Speech to restore pride and purpose to our country and to give Newcastle upon Tyne Central and the whole country our future back.

4.14 pm

Mr Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) as we debate long-term economic growth in all parts of the United Kingdom.

I cannot help but address a sentiment that has long lingered in the hearts of many in north-east Wales and my constituency: it often feels as though we are a bit invisible and forgotten by both Westminster and Cardiff Bay, and as a constituency we long for our voices to be heard and our potential to be unleashed. It is essential that both the UK and Welsh Governments acknowledge the challenges faced by regions like ours and respond with tailored policies and investments. We need infrastructure development, improved access to education and skills training, and targeted support for local businesses and industries. Only through those measures can we unlock the true potential of the regions that have been overlooked for far too long.

Across my home county of Flintshire, residents in all towns and villages see investment from the Welsh Government going into south Wales, they watch the news and see the UK Government investing in the north-east of England, and they yell at their TV screens, “What about the north-east of Wales?” We must strive for a future not where prosperity is confined to a select few, or to constituencies where Governments of whatever colour want to shore up support with investment, but where instead prosperity flows to every corner of the country, empowering individuals, families and communities to thrive.

With that in mind, I will first touch on the exciting opportunity that lies within the heart of region: the Flintshire and Wrexham investment zone bid. This collaborative endeavour holds immense importance and significance to both areas as they join forces to unlock their true potential and pave the way for a brighter future. Not only does the local authorities’ collaborative working call for praise; the manner in which the bid is being spearheaded by local industry and partnership, especially the fabulous Joanna Swash from Moneypenny in Wrexham, who is chairing the bid, shows exactly what can be achieved when frameworks are put in place that businesses can take advantage of.

The impact of the investment zone bid may be transformative to the region, not only by generating direct employment but by creating a ripple effect, creating opportunities, fostering entrepreneurship and driving economic growth in industries and supply chains across the region. We should embrace the bid, which I support wholeheartedly, as the zone will mean that we can all witness the remarkable transformation that awaits both Flintshire and Wrexham.

Secondly, devolution is holding back Wales. Every week—we have heard it several times today—Opposition Members shout things like, “You’ve had 13 years and it’s just getting worse.” I politely ask them to reflect on how Labour has been in power in Wales for 26 years and outcomes are worse in almost every measurable way. In 1997, average incomes in Wales and Scotland were almost identical; in 2023, Wales finds itself with incomes 20% lower than our northern British friends. It has become clear for a multitude of reasons that power must be taken back into hands of the UK Government,

and I shall table a Bill to allow a referendum to take place to get rid of devolution in Wales as soon the parliamentary schedule allows.

Returning power to Westminster does not mean abandoning the unique identity and cultural heritage of Wales; on the contrary, it would allow for a more cohesive approach to governance, with decisions made in the best interests of all citizens in mind, rather than just those south of Welshpool. In fact, when that was put to the First Minister of Wales at the Welsh Affairs Committee recently, he did not even try to deny that that was happening. We must get back to focusing on outcomes rather than process. It does not matter where decisions are made or who makes them; what matters is that they are the right ones. People currently trundling to work at 20 mph in Wales down roads that are full of holes and crumbling because the Welsh Government will not repair them or build any new ones know that it is the outcomes that matter, not the process.

Devolution in Wales has been a resounding failure. The Welsh Government have proven incapable of delivering on its promises, leaving our nation lagging behind in critical areas. It is time to recognise the shortcomings of devolution and take the necessary steps to rectify the situation for the good of everyone in Wales.

The core principles of conservatism call for reducing taxation, removing regulatory burdens, increased empowerment, increased entrepreneurship and opportunity, and community collaboration. It is time to shift our focus towards empowering individuals, restoring personal responsibility and minimising state interference in people’s lives. That includes removing superfluous levels of government that add nothing to the lives of the people we are here to serve.

4.19 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The way this Government run the economy does not work for the vast majority of people who live in Scotland or for those across the UK. It is frankly a disgrace that so many of my constituents, who live in the energy-rich country of Scotland, cannot afford to pay their energy bills. Let there be no doubt about it: the fault lies at the door of the UK Government. In Scotland and across the UK record numbers of people are struggling to afford food, energy and housing, yet there was a glaring omission of any tangible policies to help struggling households in the King’s Speech.

People in Scotland have so far been cushioned from the full impact of Westminster policies by Scottish Government action, but no amount of Scottish Government action can fully protect people in Scotland from regressive Westminster policies. Macroeconomic power and the real power to transform our society still lie in Westminster. The Scottish Parliament is only a devolved Parliament; it does not have the power to truly transform Scotland’s economy and society. That would come only with independence, and that is why I support independence.

I am here to scrutinise this Government. Climate change and the cost of living crisis are the two biggest challenges we face in Scotland and across the UK. The failure to include any meaningful action to tackle them in the King’s Speech is a gross dereliction of duty. With vision and a green new deal, this Government could

tackle both the climate and the cost of living crises and transform the way our economy works to benefit all our constituents. But they have neither the desire nor the inclination to do so.

We have heard much about oil licences, but oil from the Rosebank oilfield will not increase energy security for the UK, nor will it lower energy bills for my constituents. It will be sold on the international market and we will have to buy it at the same price as everyone else. It will make Equinor and Ithaca a lot of money, but UK taxpayers will pay for it. As Jess Ralston from the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit said, it is clear that this Prime Minister would rather give tax breaks to oil companies than lower energy bills. Taxpayers across the UK will fork out around £4 billion to the developers of the oilfield—money that could have been used to insulate millions of homes, many of which are set to be colder and poorer this winter. The UK Government did not even attach any net zero carbon conditions to the new oilfield. I wonder whether they plan to do so for the promised future licensing. The UK Government's new-found enthusiasm for drilling oil and gas in the North sea tells us that Scottish voters were lied to during the 2014 independence referendum, when Unionists from both the Conservative and the Labour parties said that the oil in the North sea was about to run out. Why should people in Scotland trust anything either of them say ever again?

While the UK Government continue to sell off the energy in the North sea to the highest bidder, there are no meaningful plans for the much-promised just transition. That is why Scotland—and, indeed, the UK—needs a green new deal. That phrase was first coined in the United States, and the Biden Administration have gone some way to putting a green new deal into action, with an industrial strategy that involves the world's most generous package of climate incentives, under the Inflation Reduction Act.

In Scotland, the Common Weal policy think-tank has produced some excellent work on what a green new deal would look like for my country. During the pandemic it produced a blueprint for a comprehensive green new deal for Scotland, which would involve a process of public planning, organised and implemented by public bodies and paid for out of the public purse. It would be a whole new scheme for Scotland's energy, agriculture and housing, with huge benefits of employment, prosperity and skills. It is a plan not just for our environment but for our economy and society.

A green new deal might work by tackling the problem of the cold, draughty homes in which many of our constituents live. We need to insulate and retrofit them, and we could do that if we supercharged our construction industry. That could be combined with a programme of transformative land reform to allow for reforestation to produce the wood needed for construction work. Reforestation done properly would also assist carbon capture and expand biodiversity. Once buildings are properly insulated, they could be heated by district heating systems provided by a combination of solar, thermal and geothermal systems. We could also use inter-seasonal heat storage to store heat from the summer for use in winter. All of that costs less and could feed into the grid much more quickly than new nuclear power. It would be a huge engineering feat, but other countries have managed it and it could create well-paid jobs.

The UK covid inquiry has heard evidence about how, during the pandemic, privileged Government figures could not comprehend the lives of the people for whom they were making decisions. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor are all rich men. How can they possibly understand the lives of the people I meet week in, week out at my constituency surgeries who are struggling to pay for basic necessities? We will not get sustainable economic growth for everyone until we tackle climate change, energy insecurity and the cost of living crisis. The King's Speech was just another missed opportunity to do that.

4.25 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. The first King's Speech in over 70 years outlined the Government's commitment to deliver for the British people, including the people of Stoke-on-Trent. We have a Government focused on delivering for the whole country and cities like Stoke-on-Trent thanks to levelling up and, of course, thanks to Brexit. I am glad that the topic of the debate today reflects that understanding. Those beyond London must benefit from growth and we must no longer be left behind.

After decades of decline under Labour, Stoke-on-Trent's fortunes have revived. Our iconic industry, ceramics, gives our city its sense of place as the Potteries and our sense of purpose as a local centre of world-class manufacturing for the global market. Provided that free trade is rules based, particularly against outrageous dumping, our ceramics industry has much to gain from the trade Bill. That includes manufacturers of advanced technical and industrial ceramics upon which our future industries depend. We need to help our fantastic businesses in north Staffordshire to trade right around the world more of the amazing products that we produce. It is also vital that we further support energy-intensive sectors, which provide important skilled jobs. Measures to address energy security are welcome, but further support is needed. Alongside a number of colleagues, I have recently written to the Chancellor to express the importance of supporting the ceramics sector with energy costs and not applying too rigid net zero policies when technology is yet to offer viable alternatives. If we do not get this right, it risks offshoring an industry to countries that have a far worse environmental and human rights record.

Digital industries are also increasingly important in Stoke-on-Trent, as we emerge as a leading hub for gaming. Indeed, our industrial heritage buildings are being repurposed for gaming industry disruptors, who appreciate, and feed creatively from, those buildings in all their quirky and authentic glory. According to Ofcom, gigabit full fibre connectivity in Stoke-on-Trent enables download that is 15 times faster and upload that is 70 times faster than the UK's average, so I welcome the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill, which will safeguard small and disruptor firms from any egregious behaviour by bigger players.

The Government have been extremely generous in providing investment through the transforming cities fund, levelling-up fund, heritage action zones and more. Our town centres and high streets, however, need further investment and it remains disappointing that Stoke-on-Trent has missed out previously on future high streets funding, town deal funding and the latest round of funding for

[Jack Brereton]

towns, which did not include a single town in the whole of Staffordshire. I encourage the Government to do more to help our high streets across north Staffordshire with planning reforms and, of course, investment.

More funding is always welcome, but we also need the city council, Network Rail and others to get on with actually delivering things. It is concerning that the Labour council has already reverted to type, rolling back on levelling-up schemes, lacking entirely the ambitious leadership our city needs. We also see a lack of ambition when it comes to our local public transport. Yes, we need to improve bus services, and we are delivering that through bus service improvement funding, but rail improvements are also vital to our city, and should not be flippantly dismissed as we have seen Labour do locally. Only rail can provide a rapid alternative to cars, reducing road congestion and improving air quality for all.

Fortunately, the Government have had the wisdom to see that phase 2 of HS2 failed to deliver good value. For Staffordshire, it would have meant all the pain with no gain. The £36 billion released is now available for local schemes that will make a real difference. The reopening of Meir station and the Stoke to Leek line—including a station at Fenton Manor—must now be fast-tracked and delivered. Meir has some of the worst transport deprivation in the country. By bus it can take up to an hour to reach the university, the college and the main station. Reopening Meir station will put those destinations reliably within 10 minutes by rail, and that will level up many more life chances locally than HS2 could ever achieve.

We also need to make rapid progress with lifts at Longton station, and develop plans for a station to serve Trentham. Levelling up our city's transport infrastructure so that it is back where it should be is the surest way of levelling up its potential as a place to live, work and visit. The inclusion in the King's Speech of a draft rail reform Bill is welcome, not least because Great British Railways will be based in Derby, and I suspect that nothing will increase the chances of improving services on the Crewe-Derby-Nottingham line through Stoke-on-Trent quite as much as having GBR on it. We particularly need to increase the frequency of trains on that line to two an hour. For too long, east-west rail links like this have been dismissed. However, I also look forward to investment in the local elements of the national road infrastructure work. Investment in junction 15 of the M6 and the A50/A500 corridor, for instance, is long overdue.

The foundation for our success as a growing city in a growing national economy will lie in ensuring that it is a safe place to be: safe from crime and antisocial behaviour, safe from the scourge of monkey dust, and safe from the most heinous criminal offenders. I therefore welcome the Criminal Justice Bill, the Victims and Prisoners Bill and the terrorism Bill for the part that they will play in keeping us safe.

4.31 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate on the King's Speech. I believe that His Majesty is visiting a food poverty

project today. It is marvellous to see our monarch and Head of State taking more interest in food poverty than our Government.

It is notable that the King's Speech fell during UK Parliament Week. Last week I met many of the uniformed youth organisations, and many children from schools across my constituency, who had numerous questions to ask me about the King's Speech and the processes that we have here in Parliament. One of them asked me how a man in a gold hat could sit on a gold chair and talk seriously about a cost of living crisis—but that, I thought, might not be the spirit in which to enter this debate, so instead I will raise some issues about democracy, because I do not think we talk enough about it in this democratically elected Chamber.

UK Parliament Week should have given us an opportunity to talk seriously about democracy, and about the need to ensure that the public feel they have a say in what we do in this place. One of the great ways in which we do that is through the public petitions system. As Chair of the Petitions Committee, I feel that I must raise the fact that action had been promised in the King's Speech on two public petitions that gained huge support across the House, but that action was very much missing. The first, which asked for pet theft to be made a specific offence, has widespread support in the House but huge support among the public, many of whom see pets as very much a member of the family. Given that we are a nation of animal lovers, I know a Bill on the subject would also have huge support in the House, and I think it a crying shame that it was missing from the King's Speech.

The other petition concerns the banning of conversion therapy. It is a horrible thing and I think the word "therapy" is very misleading. The petition has cross-party support and has received a huge amount of support from members of the public when there have been e-petitions on the subject. I ask the Government to think again about finding time to legislate for changes that have cross-party support and, more importantly, huge public support.

There was nothing in the King's Speech about housing and housing shortages. I have been meeting housing advisers in my own constituency, and I know, for instance, that housing allowance continuing not to rise with costs has caused an enormous increase in the already rising number of cases of homelessness. This used not to be a problem in my part of Lancashire, but we are seeing a vast number of families being made homeless by section 21 no fault evictions and rents rising at a record rate. The only thing I can see coming from this Government on housing is allowing landlords to do a net zero U-turn to keep energy-efficient homes there for tenants, but all the while we have seen a 50% rise in the cost to local authorities of addressing things such as homelessness.

On transport, Network North is all promises, but we have already been promised an awful lot in the north and it has failed to be delivered. Is this going to be yet another broken promise after so many broken transport promises? We know that 85% of the announcements so far have been reannouncements.

What about rural bus services? My constituents in villages such as Forton, Scorton and Winmarleigh desperately need access to public transport, but they remain cut off. There was nothing in the King's Speech about active travel, walking or cycling. As someone who is incredibly concerned about air quality in the

village of Galgate and on the one-way system in Lancaster city centre, I know that we need to encourage active travel but in a way that is safe for public health as well. I had the pleasure of visiting, with the Canal & River Trust, a stretch of the Lancaster canal that is desperately in need of renovation, and the Government's cuts to the trust will have a hugely detrimental impact not only in my constituency but across our canal network.

When one in seven people in England are awaiting NHS treatment and childcare is unaffordable, it seems to me that Government are going about things a bit back to front with their announcements on work and pensions. They are doing nothing to tackle the root causes of people being out of work. It is clear that the country needs change, but it is not being offered change by this tired and out-of-ideas Government. Only a Labour Government will bring about the change that my constituents in Lancaster and Fleetwood need.

I represent two universities, and I recently conducted a survey among students about the cost of living crisis. Students are acutely affected by the cost of living crisis, and they are often unable to work the hours they need to work to meet the shortfalls in their rent. I would like to see something from the Government to address the student cost of living crisis. Also, my rural constituents struggle to access reliable and fast broadband, but there was nothing in the King's Speech to address their needs.

An issue that is very close to my heart is redress for those who have been victims of sodium valproate, which harmed countless numbers of children who are now grown-up adults with huge needs and disabilities. The women affected were lied to by medical professionals. They continued with their pregnancies while being prescribed drugs that harmed their unborn babies. It is important that we give redress to the victims of a scandal that has spanned decades and generations. Sodium valproate continues to be prescribed today, and for some women it will be the only medication that will control their epilepsy, but where it is not, we must go further and faster to ensure that they can transition to other medication that does not have a harmful effect on their unborn child. I urge those on the Treasury Bench to hear my calls as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for valproate and other anti-epileptic drugs in pregnancy, and to ensure that redress is given to the families who need it.

4.38 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is imperative that we secure high, sustained economic growth right across the UK. Some welcome policies are already being implemented and there are some good initiatives in the King's Speech, although we face enormous challenges. The focus of my comments will be on coastal communities and on East Anglia.

I suggest that to deliver enduring economic growth, we need to address six issues. First, there is the cost of living crisis. Covid has a long and vicious tail, the cost of living crisis is still very much with us and this winter is likely to be very tough for many people. The household support grant has been successful and must continue, and other measures such as an increase in the local housing allowance must be given full consideration. Welfare reform must provide a clear and supported pathway for those who are some distance from the workplace.

Secondly, we must build more houses, particularly for social rent. The vehicles of delivery are primarily the housing associations, many of which are currently facing significant challenges, and Homes England. The recent announcement of funding to redevelop the former Sanyo site in Lowestoft is particularly welcome.

Thirdly, in coastal Britain, in places such as Lowestoft, there are exciting new jobs emerging in the renewables sector. Last week's announcement of funding for local skills improvement plans, including for Norfolk and Suffolk, was welcome, but we need to ensure that trainers and colleges such as East Coast College in Lowestoft receive realistic revenue funding settlements. Progress has been made in recent years, but further education still receives a raw deal.

Fourthly, investment in infrastructure right across the UK is vital—in Lowestoft, construction of the Gull Wing bridge is well advanced—and there now needs to be an emphasis on improving regional connectivity, whether road, rail or the digital highway. Around the UK, to encourage investment and to protect homes, coastal communities must be made secure from the more prevalent extreme weather conditions we are now experiencing. With an eye to the opportunities arising from offshore energy and sustainable fishing, there must be fiscal incentives to encourage investment in port infrastructure.

Fifthly, net zero must be seen as an opportunity to revitalise coastal communities all around the UK. I can understand, and I support, the rationale for the Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill, but it must be part of a long-term strategy up to 2050 and beyond, to maximise private sector investment. Energy policy must be set in a 30-year, not a five-year, framework.

Sixthly and finally, we need to revitalise our towns, which for centuries have been hubs of economic activity all around the UK. Town deals, of which Lowestoft is a recipient, are welcome, as is the recently announced long-term plan for towns, but those initiatives can provide financial support for only a limited number of centres, and we need to put in place a growth framework for all towns that promotes their revitalisation and ensures they remain honeypots for setting up SMEs. That framework could include making it easier to set up banking hubs—at present, there is a very high bar to setting them up—and continuing the reform of business rates. We made a start in the Non-Domestic Rating Act 2023, which received Royal Assent last month, but it was only a timid move towards getting the business rates multiplier back down to between 30p and 35p in the pound. That is needed to ensure that businesses can plan with some certainty, rather than having to wait each year for the cliff edge of whether the Chancellor will extend business rates relief.

We should also consider the zero-rating of VAT for redevelopment in and around our town centres. Town centres across the UK have an awful lot of heritage that, properly realised and embraced, could help to promote them and get them back to being magnets and catalysts for economic growth.

4.43 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the balanced and thoughtful speech by the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous). Securing

[Mike Kane]

high, sustained economic growth in every part of the country is an ambition we should all have in this House. The challenge lies in how we go about achieving that ambition.

The Government's plan just is not working. At the start of the year, the Prime Minister and Chancellor promised to get the economy growing; instead growth is flatlining, as the shadow Chancellor mentioned. The Bank of England has downgraded its economic forecasts and the International Monetary Fund forecasts that the UK will have the lowest growth in the G7 next year.

Labour does have a plan: one that will grow the economy and get Britain building again. We need faster approval of critical infrastructure, we need investment in the industries of the future, we need to get more people owning their own homes and we must raise living standards. In my constituency, we have oven-ready schemes that would help achieve our ambition—schemes would unlock the delivery of more than 3,000 homes, enable the development of world-class health and care research facilities, and create thousands of jobs and opportunities across growth sectors. The Government are aware of those schemes, and should and could have supported Manchester and Trafford to deliver them.

The two town centres in my constituency, Wythenshawe and Sale, submitted bids to the last round of the levelling-up fund. In Wythenshawe town centre, Manchester City Council has invested £20 million in plans to provide a once-in-a-generation programme of regeneration, including more than 1,600 new homes—it should not be this difficult. Those homes will breathe new life, jobs and vital economic activity into the town centre.

In Sale town centre, in addition to the successful regeneration of Stanley Square by Altered/Space, Trafford Council has bought and is demolishing Sale magistrates court in order to build dozens of new and affordable homes on the site. It has regeneration plans for other locations in the town centre, including the leisure facilities and the public realm. However, both bids to the levelling-up fund—for Wythenshawe and for Sale—were rejected by the Government.

We have an approved masterplan for Wythenshawe Hospital in my constituency, which will see the transformation of the increasingly out-of-date hospital campus into a state-of-the-art health village, with affordable housing for nurses and an aparthotel. It will also create world-class research facilities in the health and care sector, a sustainable campus that delivers a commitment to be net zero by 2038, and other complementary uses, such as hotels, conferencing, training and retail. All of that will be done while delivering inclusive growth, which will derive maximum benefit through local job creation and employment and training opportunities, ensuring that it is local people who see the benefit, in addition to those in the region.

The delivery model proposed for the development of Wythenshawe Hospital is a financially driven, phased construction approach, using blended funding. That funding solution could leverage the many commercial, health and social-related investment opportunities afforded by the site's prime location, while supporting the requirement of reduced levels of NHS capital. However, to realise this opportunity, Government and Treasury support is needed to unlock a technical solution to the

current NHS capital regime. It is now more than 18 months since the approval of the masterplan and we have seen zero progress from this Government on a workable solution, although I am grateful to Lord Markham for engaging with me and with Homes England on this issue. This is not getting Britain building; it is blocking Britain building and flatlining our economic growth.

My area also has the Airport City masterplan. Manchester airport in my constituency is the largest UK airport outside London, and it provides international and domestic passenger and freight connectivity for the whole of northern Britain. I welcome the Government's pledge in the King's Speech to begin to look at consumer protection and the consumer experience in our airlines industry. The current transformation plan at my local airport will support 50 million passengers by 2030. There is still much to do; surface transport, the fabric of the estate and active travel all need to be addressed. The plan is set to deliver up to 5 million square feet and 16,000 jobs, with companies such as The Hut Group, Amazon and DHL already working on site.

Wythenshawe and Sale East has a plan to get Britain building and to grow our economy. We have a world-class airport, an Airport City enterprise zone, the Wythenshawe Hospital masterplan and plans for the development of Wythenshawe and Sale town centres. This is the Prime Minister's first King's Speech, yet he has nothing to say on housing and it includes more division and more of the same. What is needed to deliver the economic growth our country needs is change. Change is the question at the next election and the answer is Labour. A Labour Government will offer a decade of national renewal and replace the 13 years of national decline that we have had.

4.49 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I welcome the emphasis in the King's Speech on improving the life chances of young people through the provision of academic and technical education, which is key to securing high and sustained economic growth in every part of the country, including beautiful Hastings and Rye.

Ensuring that young people have the knowledge and skills to succeed is especially important in Hastings and Rye—a coastal community that, like many others, is struggling with higher levels of educational and vocational deprivation, resulting in a local workforce whose skills do not adequately meet the local need, especially in our wonderful engineering and manufacturing businesses, such as Focus SB, Technoturn, General Dynamics, Marshall-Tufflex and Torr Scientific, to name but a few.

Academic education is not the only path for our young people and it is right to have equal focus and funding for technical and vocational skills. Skills are key to economic growth. They are a form of currency in the working world. In today's ever-changing job market, employers are often more interested in hiring employees with a specific skillset rather than those who simply have a university degree. Therefore, the focus on apprenticeships is fantastic, but in coastal communities such as Hastings, these must centre on young people and SMEs.

We have an increasing number of NEETs—those not in education, employment or training. According to the Youth Futures Foundation, if we match the lowest NEET rate in the OECD, which is in the Netherlands,

we could see a £69 billion boost in GDP. A focus on revenue funding for youth services, rather than on capital funding, is needed so that organisations, such as Xtrax and the Y Centre in my constituency, can do their thing.

Coastal communities have huge potential to become a resource—a coastal powerhouse—to the UK, rather than a problem to solve. It is fantastic that Hastings received £24 million in the town deal. Hastings and Rother both have levelling-up partnerships, and Hastings will receive an additional £20 million over the next 10 years, but our coastal communities also need a policy focus to unleash their potential and become a valuable powerhouse for the UK.

Our coastline and coastal communities should be at the forefront of nature-based solutions to climate change and renewable energy industries, including offshore wind developments, green hydrogen production and wave and tidal-stream energy. The Government should be ramping up investment in those areas, leveraging in private investment and boosting coastal communities.

Skills must evolve with the needs of the modern labour market and specific action is needed to generate new skills, to encourage more diversity of employment and to meet the needs of local employment opportunities. We have in Hastings and Rye, besides wonderful career opportunities in tourism and hospitality, an incredible engineering and manufacturing sector that wants to grow but that needs a skilled workforce. Through the towns fund, East Sussex Coast College has developed an important regional-scale project at its Ore campus that will improve skills provision in the new green and low-carbon technologies.

As regards recent announcements about education, the new advanced British standard will take the best of A-levels and T-levels and replace them, bringing together the technical and academic routes into a single qualification, which will widen the breadth of British school education. The proposed qualification will require a sea change in education thinking and will rely on the Treasury funding a new qualification for thousands of young people. The standard's success will rely on Ministers encouraging the delivery of technical subjects at pre-16 levels, and the Government have cited the education models of many European countries as proof that we need the standard. However, a key feature of those countries' models is technical education from the ages of 13 or 14, which has become a rarity in the UK.

That is why I am an advocate of the Baker Dearing Educational Trust's university technical college sleeves. A decision by Ministers on the proposal for UTC sleeves within existing secondary schools is anticipated soon. Baker Dearing is aware of a significant number of large, highly regarded multi-academy trusts that wish to introduce the UTC sleeve model into at least one of their secondary schools, because they can see the benefit of that approach in improving student engagement, attendance and outcomes among certain pupil cohorts, and have witnessed the increasing interest in high-quality apprenticeships for leavers aged 18. All of that will contribute to economic growth.

Affordable housing is also key to economic growth for many reasons, not least that children and young people can access education and employment opportunities only if they have safe and secure homes.

Finally, improving transport connections and roads, and providing faster rail and bus services, is essential for Hastings and Rye and East Sussex as a whole to encourage and facilitate economic growth. Poor transport connectivity continues to blight Hastings and Rye, and it would help if Transport for the South East were made a statutory body.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I want to get everybody in as fairly as possible, so the time limit will be reduced to five minutes after the next speaker.

4.55 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on His Majesty's first King's Speech.

The news last week that the UK economy flatlined in the third quarter of this year was hardly a shock. It is the result of 13 years of Conservative choices that have delivered low growth, skyrocketing mortgages, soaring prices, crumbling public services and house building at its lowest rate since the second world war. Every family and business in Britain has paid the price of the Conservatives' failed energy policy, leaving Britain the worst hit country in western Europe.

Listening to the King's Speech last week, I was disappointed by the absence of a serious agenda on planning, infrastructure and growth, with no housing targets or planning reform, weakened proposals for leasehold and renters' reform, and the binning of the Government's manifesto promise to deliver 300,000 homes a year.

Meanwhile, my constituents are left spending nearly two fifths of their income on rent, even before tax; living in housing that is cold, damp, mouldy and expensive to heat; and with a Tory mortgage penalty that is estimated to take £2,600 out of the pockets of families in Birmingham, Edgbaston this year. To his credit, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities admitted that the UK's housing system is broken, but it is hard to see what this King's Speech does to change that.

That brings me to my first point about the length of time it takes for anything to get built under this Government. HS2 is a great example. The previous Labour Government completed HS1 on time and under budget. This Government had 13 years and they failed, which meant that the biggest infrastructure project in Europe was cancelled. My constituents understand that modern public transport is not just about journey times to London, but about freeing up capacity and connectivity to all the other major cities and towns, so that people can travel for work, leisure, education and training. It can widen the horizon of their ambitions and bring the whole of the region closer together. What are they left with now? They are left with a gaping great building site in the centre of Birmingham for years to come; all the disruption and delay of the works at Curzon Street for a high-speed rail to nowhere; more delays to the east Birmingham metro, which, under Mayor Andy Street, will cost taxpayers £150,000 per metre of track; and, to top it all, no alternative to Avanti on the west coast main line. Having achieved the dubious distinction of having the most complaints of any operator, and

[Preet Kaur Gill]

consistently ranking as one of the worst performing on the entire rail network, this Government decided to hand Avanti a lucrative new contract. What did Avanti do? It announced swathes of cuts to services on the west coast main line before the ink had dried.

At the root of so many of the problems besetting British infrastructure and our housing crisis is the planning system. Surely no one in the House would agree that the current regime is fit for purpose. When we have millions locked out of the dream of home ownership, bills soaring and huge national infrastructure challenges such as the race for net zero, we cannot go on like this.

There are currently £200 billion of clean energy projects stuck in the queue for connections to the national grid. This country once built the national grid in less time than it now takes to get a connection to it. Labour has set out a plan for Great British Energy, which will procure the grid supply chain that Britain needs and bring down bills. The Government's flagship King's Speech energy policy will not take a single penny off energy bills, and even the Energy Secretary has admitted that.

The UK has some of the least energy-efficient homes in Europe, and Birmingham has some of the worst rates of mould and damp in the country. As we face another cold winter, with energy bills as high as they have been in living memory, my constituents are seriously worried about the toll on their finances and their health. What was in the King's Speech for them? A primary school teacher contacted me about a pupil in year 3, just seven years old, who told her that she could not sleep at night because the mould exacerbated her asthma and she could barely breathe. My constituent Agnes, a junior doctor living in privately rented accommodation riddled with mould and damp, told me she felt helpless, as she could not end her contract and her landlord would not help. Birmingham has nearly 22,000 rental homes with category 1 hazards such as excessive cold, mould and damp.

The council is now getting on with taking rogue landlords to task and has launched the 3 Cities Retrofit scheme with Coventry and Wolverhampton, to help to shape the local retrofit market using their combined 116,000 social homes—but where are the Government supporting them? Where is the Government's version of Labour's warm home plan to upgrade 19 million homes, cut energy bills and create thousands of good jobs for electricians, engineers and construction workers across our country?

My constituents cannot afford a Government that will not grasp the difficult issues or take the long-term decisions the country needs. Whether on house building, national infrastructure or the cost of living, this King's Speech does nothing to measure up to the scale of the challenges that the economy or my constituents face. Labour, meanwhile, will build 1.5 million homes over five years, with a planning reform blitz, planning passports for urban brownfield development and a devolution package to spread power out of Westminster and into communities on housing, transport, energy and more.

That is the ambition we need—a national mission to get Britain building again and grow our country from the grassroots, a plan to expand the country's productive

capabilities and at the same time to change who benefits. Does it not say it all that after 13 years of the last Labour Government, disposable income had risen by more than 40%—that is £11,000 per person back in people's pockets—yet disposable incomes are now forecast to grow by just £42 between 2010 and 2025? Last week we should have had a King's Speech that put working people first and a plan to get Britain building again, securing high, sustained economic growth in every part of the country. Only Labour will get Britain's future back.

5.1 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in the first King's Speech debate in nearly 70 years. I looked back at my comments during the last Humble Address debate, where the Government promised to make hundreds of millions of pounds-worth of upgrades to my local hospital and construct a new specialist emergency care hospital. I am grateful that the first set of funds has now been released for that.

The King's Speech contains a lot to be welcomed, including the Media Bill, the draft rail reform Bill, the Renters (Reform) Bill, the Sentencing Bill and the Victims and Prisoners Bill. Turning however to the theme of today's debate, securing high, sustained economic growth in every part of the country, I commend the Government for focusing on economic growth. Only with economic growth can we pay for those public services that our constituents rely on, and I want to touch on a few of those today.

I will start with rail. Although Carshalton and Wallington is in a London borough, it is one of the worst-connected parts of Greater London and would hugely benefit from a more efficient rail network to enable people to travel not just in and out of central London, but across London as well—a fact consistently lost on the Mayor of London, as we consistently come last out of all 32 London boroughs for investment from this Mayor. I invite the Government to look again at the redistribution of funding from HS2, to see whether any of that funding can be allocated to the Croydon area remodelling scheme to unlock the Brighton mainline and deliver improvements on that important link.

Moving on, I want to talk about being safe online. Many of my constituents raise with me issues including scams on social media platforms such as Meta. I look forward to seeing how the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill will be able to bring back consumer confidence online and provide a robust legal framework so that people can trust the services provided to them.

I want to touch on other elements of the King's Speech. I welcome the Government's ambition to make people's safety and security paramount for the next parliamentary Session. That is particularly salient in Carshalton and Wallington, where the Mayor of London continues to fail to grasp the problem of violent crime in the capital. He promised a violence reduction unit, but we are yet to see any details of that unit's operations or what effect it has had. We have recently seen a number of attacks locally, including an horrendous knife attack on the Roundshaw estate.

Many of my constituents are waiting with bated breath to see how the Criminal Justice Bill will tackle the scourge that is knife crime and violent crime. Tougher

sentencing is an important step forward, but I remind those on the Treasury Front Bench of my interest in restorative justice and the part that that could play in breaking the cycle of reoffending. I look forward to the conclusion of the Victims and Prisoners Bill, and I hope that a right to access restorative justice services will be included in it so that we can help people to break the cycle of reoffending. Of course, punishment must be part of that as well, and creating a criminal offence for the possession of a bladed article with intent to cause harm will help to take more knives off our streets and stop the next generation taking up knives in the first place.

Lastly, let me touch briefly on the Renters (Reform) Bill, which will affect many of my constituents and many Londoners. I hear from many renters that there is no way of holding their landlords to account and that housing quality is not kept up to standard. The privately rented property portal will, I hope, be able to provide some security for tenants. Landlords will also benefit from the Bill, as they will be able to evict antisocial tenants more easily and disputes will be quicker and easier to resolve. I hope that, as the Bill makes progress through the House, we bring more harmony between landlords and tenants, and make the UK a much safer place in which to live and rent, cracking down on wrongdoers while supporting innovators.

Overall, I very much welcome the measures in the King's Speech. I absolutely welcome the Government's focus on and commitment to economic growth because—to repeat what I said at the beginning of my remarks—without economic growth, through backing wealth creators and entrepreneurs, we will not see the improvement in public services that we desperately want.

5.6 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I will address the crisis in the middle east and the Government's failure to back the growing calls for a ceasefire from the UN Secretary-General and beyond, and I will speak to amendment (b), tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), of which I am a sponsor.

Already, after just five weeks, more than 11,000 people in Gaza and more than 1,200 Israelis have been killed. It is the duty of everyone in this House to help save life—both Palestinian and Israeli—to help stop the bombing, to help end the suffering, to help free the hostages, to stop the war crimes, and to get the aid that is so desperately needed into Gaza. That means that we have to work for a ceasefire, and that work needs to happen now—there is not a second to waste.

The UN Secretary-General says that the way forward is a ceasefire, and so does the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. In fact, the heads of all major UN agencies are calling for a humanitarian ceasefire, so why do our Government think that they know better than the world's leading humanitarian agencies? President Macron has now called for a ceasefire, so France joins other European nations such as Spain, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland and Ireland, as well as the UN Secretary-General, in that call. Other major nations, such as Brazil, and middle eastern nations including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, are all calling for a ceasefire.

Securing a negotiated ceasefire—one binding on all sides—is achievable but it requires a huge diplomatic effort. It is time for our Government to add their weight to the push for a ceasefire rather than dismissing out of hand a proposal that has growing international support—especially when polls show that two thirds of the British public want a ceasefire. I am afraid that the Government have instead sought to distort what is being demanded, so let us be totally clear: a ceasefire means that all sides stop firing. That requires negotiation, so our Government should be straining every sinew, using every possible diplomatic avenue, and talking to Governments of all persuasions—those with sway in Israel, and those with channels to Hamas, such as Qatar—to secure a negotiated ceasefire that is binding on all parties, and bring an end to this crisis.

Of course, securing a ceasefire will not be easy, but it will not happen if Governments do not even bother to try. Once we secure that ceasefire, instead of more bloodshed, more suffering and occupation, let us turn this moment—as difficult as it now seems—into the moment when we secure, alongside Israel, the viable Palestinian state that is so needed for the cause of justice.

5.9 pm

Kate Kniveton (Burton) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It is an honour to speak in the first King's Speech debate in over 70 years, and I pay tribute to His Majesty the King for the grace and dignity with which he has taken up his duties and delivered his first Gracious Speech. There is much to welcome in this Gracious Speech, which sets out long-term measures to safeguard our country's future, whether it is keeping communities safe through tougher sentencing of prisoners, securing our energy security while maintaining our net zero commitments or securing economic growth across every part of our country.

I know that my constituents in Burton and Uttoxeter are really feeling the effects of recent high inflation and the impact it has had on household finances. Earlier this year, the Office for Budget Responsibility reported that the economic and fiscal outlook had “brightened somewhat”, but there are still challenges. We must encourage productivity, growth and business investment, but we need the infrastructure in place to support that growth.

I am very proud to be the project champion for the A50/A500 corridor, which runs through my constituency and is a key strategic link for many international businesses, including JCB, Toyota, Rolls-Royce, Nestlé and many more. Unfortunately, this key piece of our nation's manufacturing infrastructure is currently costing our economy £8 million each year due to delays impacting residents, commuters and businesses. At several pinch points, the corridor is slow and unreliable, with average rush hour speeds of 20 mph.

Vital improvements need to be made to unlock the potential of this corridor, and the proposals put together by Midlands Connect offer a long-term programme of interventions to improve reliability and shorten journey times. This is about not only improving connectivity for residents and businesses but creating jobs, driving innovation and reducing emissions through alternative fuels and electric vehicle infrastructure. These improvements would

[Kate Kniveton]

support 30,000 new homes and 17,000 new jobs by 2030, as well as improving air quality made worse by chronic congestion. I was delighted when the Prime Minister announced that as part of Network North, this vital corridor will finally see the investment it needs, which will mean a 30% improvement in journey times and, as Midlands Connect found in its recent report, the potential to generate £12 billion for the economy.

Further investment in our region will allow the world-class businesses based here to expand, develop and unleash the potential of new green technologies. New hydrogen engines are being developed, which will be used in passenger transport and heavy plant machinery of the future. I pay tribute to the work being undertaken by Staffordshire County Council to promote the region as the UK's hydrogen valley, and I look forward to working with Ministers through this Parliament to deliver these improvements at pace and realise the benefits of economic growth for my constituents and those who live and work in the area.

5.13 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. "Thin", "empty", "just depressing", "lost the will to lead"

and

"nothing in this for the public".

Those are the reported words of Tory MPs describing the measures or lack of measures in the King's Speech. Others were pleased, as the thin legislative programme gave the optimists more time to campaign in their constituencies ahead of a general election and the realists more time to look for a new job.

The PM claims he is taking difficult decisions, but it is the people in this country who are making the difficult decisions every single day, as they make sacrifices and grapple with a cost of living crisis made in Downing Street. Figures released yesterday show that not only has poverty risen in the UK but that in 2022, nearly 4 million people experienced destitution, and thousands of babies and toddlers are being admitted to hospital with lung conditions believed to be from living in damp and mouldy homes. Despite this, there was absolutely nothing in the King's Speech to help those families. Not that long ago, the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights visited the UK and found that Conservative Governments had inflicted "great misery" through

"punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous"

austerity policies driven by a political desire to undertake "social re-engineering", rather than by economic necessity. This month, his successor reiterated those concerns, stating that UK policies continue to inflict misery.

Even in a pandemic, the Government could not prioritise children. First, we had the chaotic voucher scheme. Then Tory MPs voted to withdraw support for free school meals. The holiday activities and food programme was hard fought for from 2017 onwards, but it was not until 2021 that the Government decided to roll it out. My fully costed School Breakfast Bill would have seen nearly 2 million children start the day with full stomachs;

instead, the Government introduced a scheme that provides support to only 2,500 out of the 8,700 schools they identified as eligible. My cost-neutral Healthy Start Scheme (Take-Up) (No. 2) Bill would ensure that eligible families automatically receive free fruit, vegetables and milk; instead, the Government claim that financial regulations are preventing auto-enrolment, despite the payment and card operators saying that it would be entirely possible if only the Government would co-operate.

Evidence given to the child of the north all-party parliamentary group shows that children in the north are more likely to live in poverty. We heard testimony from expectant mothers who have been forced to have abortions because they cannot afford another mouth to feed and clothe. It is estimated that 4 million children now live in poverty. In my part of the world, the north-east, we have the highest rate of child poverty in the United Kingdom, at 38%, and in South Shields that figure rises to over 42%. It is clear that levelling up, just like the northern powerhouse before it, is a vacuous, empty phrase that was never intended to, and never will, do anything to improve the life chances of the children in my area.

If the economy does not work for everyone and consigns millions of children to poverty, the Government have failed. It is time for a general election, so that my party can do as we did last time and ensure that every single child has the very best start in life.

5.17 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the first King's Speech for more than 70 years, particularly today on the occasion of His Majesty's 75th birthday, and particularly when the topic is economic growth, which goes to the heart of everything we are here to do in this place. Economic growth is not about statistics, percentages, and headlines in the *Financial Times*: it is about the real impact on households, residents and businesses across our constituencies and the whole country.

I would say this, but in my constituency of Burnley and Padiham, we probably have the best set of local businesses anywhere in the country. They do not just stand ready to help us with our future economic growth; they are doing it already. I am thinking of brilliant businesses in Burnley, including multinationals like VEKA and Safran Nacelles and big bakeries like Warburtons and Cherrytree. In Padiham, we have businesses like LP Technology, which is expanding at a rapid pace, and so many more. That is what we do in Burnley and Padiham: we make things and we export them.

That is the first thing about the King's Speech that I want to touch on. Since the 2019 general election, we have passed some exciting legislation and signed some exciting trade deals with countries including Australia and New Zealand. I was privileged to sit on the Bill Committee during the passage of the Trade Act 2021, in which we rolled over a whole swathe of trade deals from our membership of the EU. It is very exciting that we are now looking at those same trade deals and seeing where we can go further, strengthening our relationships with fast-growing countries. That is exactly what the new legislation for CPTPP will do. Growth in countries like Vietnam and Canada is faster than almost anywhere else in the world; those are the countries where our businesses can seize opportunities. LP Technology—one

of the businesses in Padiham that I just mentioned—is going to countries like Australia and signing massive business deals. That is only possible because of the amazing work of our trade negotiators and the team in the Department for Business and Trade. The more of that we can do, the better.

Economic growth is centred in our communities, and that is why I was delighted to see the long-term plan for towns mentioned in the King's Speech. Since 2019, we have done an incredible job in Burnley and Padiham of working with Government to secure levelling-up funding. We secured £20 million from levelling-up fund 1 and £12 million from levelling-up fund 2, and the Prime Minister came to Burnley personally to announce that we were one of the towns to get a further £20 million as part of the long-term plan. We are going to use that to work with communities to find the things we need to do to secure extra economic growth. In the second town in my constituency, Padiham, we have a flood defence scheme worth almost £18 million that is securing the future of the town, the local economy and the residents who live there.

None of that would be possible without employment, and I was delighted to hear my right hon. Friend the Chancellor speak at the opening of this debate about his plan in the autumn statement next week to make progress on helping people get into work. Unfortunately, in Burnley we continue to have an unemployment rate that is higher than the national average, and that applies to both adults and young people. We are making massive progress in tackling that issue, and it is important we tackle it because of the real impact it has on people and families. The best thing we can do to help families in Burnley is to help them get into work, and that is particularly true of households that have been out of work for some time. I hope that in the autumn statement next week we hear more from the Chancellor on the work he has been doing with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on tackling long-term out-of-work households.

I will end by talking about the final thing that I think makes a massive difference to economic growth, even if it is a politician's hobby horse, and that is potholes. Our roads in Burnley and indeed across Lancashire need upgrading. We have brilliant logistics businesses in Burnley that take the products I have mentioned and send them around the world, but we can only do that with roads and infrastructure that are fit for the 21st century. My final ask of those on the Treasury Bench is that, as we look to the autumn statement and the Budget, we continue the focus on potholes and on the infrastructure that makes our country work.

5.22 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham).

Even by the standards of this shambolic Government, this King's Speech is a wafer-thin effort. That might be forgivable if we were living in a country where public services were in good shape and the economy was going gangbusters, but we are not. The reality is that, after 13 years of Tory neglect, Britain is breaking and nothing works any more. There is an NHS waiting list of 7 million, schools are literally crumbling and trains are unreliable, extortionately expensive and packed to the rafters. Some

90% of crime is going unsolved, with dreadful conviction rates and victims facing three-year court delays, while raw sewage is being pumped into our rivers and child poverty has tripled since 2017.

This is an utterly shameful record, but it is not only our public services that the Conservatives have broken. They have also taken a wrecking ball to our economy, with a kamikaze Budget that cost £30 billion, and it is working people who are paying the price, with mortgages up almost £3,000, rents up 40% and the weekly food shop up 11% on last year. Their approach to the economy is plain to see. Low public investment has led to the UK having the lowest private investment in the developed world. A sclerotic planning system and rampant nimbyism have hindered house building and stymied our wind farm development, and the abandonment of our manufacturing sector has led to the UK being the most regionally imbalanced economy in the developed world.

If we are to clear up this Conservative mess, we are going to need a decade of national renewal delivered by a mission-driven Labour Government. So Labour's first two missions are to deliver the highest sustained growth in the G7 and to make Britain a clean energy superpower. The crucial point here is that these two missions go hand in hand. They will be the mutually reinforcing drivers of the green jobs revolution that Labour will deliver.

Just look at the opportunities in floating offshore wind in my Aberavon constituency. FLOW is a prime example of where Wales's geography offers huge competitive advantage, with the potential to create 16,000 jobs, deliver energy security and lower household bills. But we need central Government to match these ambitions, delivering on the full potential of 20 GW of clean energy by offering a fair strike price for developers in return for ensuring that the manufacturing supply chain jobs are kept here in the UK. If we get this right, Port Talbot could become a green energy and manufacturing hub, with our steelworks making the steel for the floating turbine substructures in a new plate mill, and those very turbines then providing the energy to run the Port Talbot steelworks as well as powering tens of millions of homes across the UK. This bold, ambitious, pioneering plan can become a model for a new economy. South Wales was the cradle of the first industrial revolution, and a Labour Government in Westminster, working in close partnership with the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff Bay, will put our proud country at the heart of the green industrial revolution.

Whichever way we look at it, we need to make, buy and sell more in Britain. Labour knows that this begins with the steel industry, with our £3 billion clean steel renewal commitment dwarfing the Government's dangerously unambitious and short-sighted approach. The Conservatives are failing to understand the growing commercial opportunities that a strong British steel industry would be well positioned to seize, and they are failing to recognise the risks of over-reliance on other countries. Decarbonisation is, of course, important, not least because consumers are increasingly demanding greener products, but decarbonisation must not become a byword for deindustrialisation. It would be utterly unforgivable if the deal that the Government have done with Tata Steel leads to the offshoring of production, good jobs and carbon emissions to other countries that use dirtier steelmaking processes and that do not always have Britain's best interests at heart.

[Stephen Kinnock]

This King's Speech is noteworthy more for what it does not contain than for what it does. There is nothing on the cost of living crisis, nothing on the crisis in our public services, nothing to address our protracted productivity crisis, and nothing to tackle the epidemic of 6,000 business bankruptcies that we saw this summer. That is because this is a Government who have given up on governing. They just sit there desperately clinging on to power for power's sake and arguing with one another.

The British people want a Government who see a problem as something to be solved, not something to be exploited. The choice is clear: five more years of the same Tory chaos or a Labour Government who will give Britain its future back.

5.27 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Transport infrastructure and regional connectivity are key to increasing both regional and national economic growth—they are the key to truly levelling up. Yet, as was the case with actual measures to tackle the cost of living, neither the Chancellor nor, indeed, the shadow Chancellor said anything whatsoever about them in their speeches earlier today.

The Williams rail review was commissioned three Transport Secretaries ago, in 2018—although I did wonder yesterday if I might have to change that to four Transport Secretaries ago. It recommended the formation of Great British Railways, and ever since then Secretaries of State and Rail Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box and promised the legislation necessary to deliver GBR, which the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) promised would be a “rail revolution”. Well, it is a very sedately paced revolution. If George Washington and co had proceeded with their revolution at the same speed, there is a fair chance that they would still be using pounds, shillings and pence, and happily drinking tea in Boston harbour. It is ridiculously slow.

When I asked in June, the Government had already spent more than £64 million on the Great British Railways transition team. But what transition? If there is only the promise of a draft Bill in this Session, that kicks any action down the track until after polling day. We were told that GBR is vital to the future of the rail network. If it is so vital, we in this place should be debating and voting on it before polling day.

At least the Government managed to find room in their legislative timetable to deal with the menace of pedicabs in London—a topic on which I am sure Members outwith the M25 have been absolutely inundated with correspondence. The home counties and areas inside the M25 have, as ever, been doing well from UK Government spending. Stage 1 of East West Rail is projected to cost £1.3 billion, Crossrail £19 billion, Thameslink £7 billion and the remnants of HS2 nearly £50 billion. The Treasury's own figures show that the east midlands sits at under a third of per capita transport spending compared with London, with the south-west at 35% and the north-east at 37%. That is not levelling up or securing high, sustained economic growth in every part of the country—it is leaving the regions of England with scraps from the table, while London gets gold-plated investment each and every time.

Meanwhile, Scotland has a Government who actually do things, such as rolling electrification, reopening lines, trialling peak fare abolition and the full public ownership of rail services under Scottish Government control. Clearly there is a lot more to do, but instead of pushing value for the taxpayer by gouging passengers and cutting spending, ScotRail and the Scottish Government are targeting gains in revenue by boosting usage, with the result that passenger numbers are up by 33% on last year across the network, the highest by a country mile of any UK rail operator. That shows what ambition can mean and can deliver. It is high time that the UK Government showed the same level of ambition, so that the rest of England is not left even further behind.

We have also seen the UK Government publish their minimum service level regulations. It is a disgrace that we have a Government who use Victorian milliners as the template for industrial relations in the 21st century, with lists of the rail services that workers will be compelled to operate under penalty of prosecution published on the website. It is surely no coincidence that European countries with progressive employment laws, where employees are treated with respect and are social partners, have some of the best-performing economies with the highest standards of living. There is simply no way to secure high sustained economic growth in every part of the country when Government policy is to treat skilled workers as chattels. To be absolutely clear, the Scottish Government will play no part in this forced labour scheme, and we will not co-operate with the UK Government on the implementation of this appalling measure in our transport network or in any other area of devolved policy.

People in Scotland have had no faith in the Conservative party to deliver a better economy for decades. Its last election win in our country was in 1955, and since the '80s it has remained a rump in Scottish politics. It is the only main party not to have held office in Holyrood—a fact unlikely to change any time soon. Conservatives' defence of the Union as an engine of economic development has been threadbare for years, but ever more so as the few remaining strands keeping the UK aloft are being picked apart by their own actions. Brexit and the cost of living crisis continue to wreak havoc on communities across Scotland and the rest of these isles. Jobs and industry are downscaling and closing all the time, with both main UK parties committed to the insular and dogmatic “Rule, Britannia” policies so beloved of the *Daily Mail*. There is an opportunity for Scotland to build a better future. It is time that both UK parties stop blocking that opportunity and respect the right of the Scottish people to grasp that future and choose independence.

5.32 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this King's Speech debate. After 13 years in power, five Prime Ministers, seven Chancellors, an economic crash and a Brexit without a plan, last week we were presented with a wafer-thin programme that honestly could be done by Christmas. Many of the Bills carried over are watered down and weakened versions of their original selves. One example is the Renters (Reform) Bill. We had to wait four years to debate the Bill. There were five months between First and Second Reading, yet the Bill goes nowhere near far enough to protect renters properly, particularly from no-fault evictions.

Court proceedings for no-fault evictions are at a seven-year high. My borough of Enfield has been hit particularly hard by this eviction crisis, having the highest number of section 21 evictions in the whole of London. It leads to a massive increase in homelessness, increased use of temporary accommodation such as hotels, a huge financial burden on local authorities as they try to grapple with the cost of that accommodation, and increased fear and anxiety for families across the country. I fear that the Government know all too well the impact that these evictions are having on people, but they either do not care or cannot stand up to their party.

Last week, we had the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), declaring war on the use of tents on the streets, disgracefully stating that homelessness is “a lifestyle choice”. According to the charity Crisis, the loss of private tenancy is the leading cause of homelessness. In Enfield, the risk of homelessness increased by 38% because of section 21 notices last year. This Government have chosen to delay banning section 21 evictions for four years. These are not lifestyle choices—they are hard evidence of Tory failure.

These evictions are not only deeply distressing to renters, causing grief and hardship, but costly to the public purse. In fact, Enfield Council faces spending an additional £20 million on temporary accommodation this year alone—that is £20 million that the local authority can no longer spend on public services, despite the dire need for investment and reform. That is funding it can no longer spend on housing or on stuff like social care—the list goes on. Rents in the UK were recently reported to be the highest on record. Far too few homes are being built, mortgage rates are spiralling out of control, and families in my constituency of Enfield North are paying an extra £350 on their mortgages every month, all thanks to 13 years of economic mismanagement and the Tory party’s mortgage bombshell.

Things like working hard, buying a home and raising a family are difficult enough as it is. People expect the Government to keep the economy stable so that their family’s future is secure, but meeting monthly payments is now forcing tough choices, from having to cut back on the weekly shop to abandoning family holidays. A food bank in my constituency recently told me that demand this year is out of control. All those problems demand the very best from the Government, but sadly they have no plan to fix them.

Our economy, like our country, is crying out for change. We need a Government who are on the side of working people and who have ambition, energy and ideas, but this is a tired Government who have lost their goal to govern. The Prime Minister and his Government have failed my constituents and the country. The only way to deliver the change he talks about and which the country needs is to call a general election.

5.36 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): The words in the title of the debate, “economic growth in every part of the country,” feel like some kind of cruel gaslighting given the dire economic conditions that too many of our constituents face. After 13 years of this Government, we have had devastating austerity, public services slashed, local government decimated, the growth of privatised monopolies and the creeping privatisation of everything

from healthcare to our very own data. Given that track record, I do not think that anybody expects the shortest monarch’s speech since 2014 to contain the seeds of Britain’s salvation. It is increasingly clear that only a change of Government will achieve that goal. Therefore, in many ways, my contribution is not just for the current Government but for any Government who may come to power in the near future.

Genuine levelling up, which many of us in this place believe in, implies that everyone and everywhere that contributes to the UK’s prosperity should share in the bounty they help create. It is a simple principle. If we accept it, by that metric, former British Caribbean islands should be at the front of the queue when it comes to levelling up. This is known internationally as reparatory justice: namely, recognition of and compensation for transatlantic chattel slavery, which was the greatest atrocity in the history of humankind, without parallel in its brutality, in its 400-year length and in its profitability. At its 18th century height, slave plantations were making £4 billion to £5 billion a year in profit at 2010 prices, making Caribbean economies the single biggest source of imperial gain ever seen.

The recent Brattle report commissioned by the University of the West Indies estimated that the UK owes £18.8 trillion in compensation to Caribbean islands for the hundreds of years of exploitation. That is not just for chattel slavery but for the continued brutal and bloody exploitation that took place after emancipation. For that emancipation, the slave owners, not the slaves, were paid billions of pounds of compensation, and we as a country—everyone in the Chamber—only finished paying off the debt for that in 2015.

When recently I went back to the Caribbean, I had the chance to speak to everyone from Dickon Mitchell, the Prime Minister of Grenada, through to Avinash Persaud, a key economic adviser to Mia Mottley, the Prime Minister of Barbados. I must admit that I was a bit of a stuck record. I asked why my constituents should be expected to pay reparations to the Caribbean when many of them will struggle to heat their home and feed themselves this winter. The answer was intriguing. I was told that they should not. Arley Gill, chair of the Grenada National Reparations Commission, was very clear. He told me that the families, corporations, banks and other institutions that have exploited the Caribbean for centuries and continue to do so are the same ones that hoard that wealth in the UK or the various British overseas territories for tax avoidance purposes.

Unless we in this country are prepared to tax wealth more, deal with the imperial legacy of Britain’s network of global tax havens and challenge corporate power, whose extractive and exploitive practices have now boomeranged back from empire to almost every aspect of our lives here in the UK, we will never be able to fix our broken economy. By boomeranging I mean housing, water, energy and transport being privatised, and health on its way. Nearly every aspect of our lives these past 50 years has become financialised, leaving millions of our constituents in poverty and debt. Thus, the structural adjustment of the Caribbean became austerity and privatisation for the UK.

If we in this place are to live up to our stated rhetoric of equality, fairness and justice, we need to understand that our responsibility stretches to all who have contributed to this country’s wealth, wherever they may be. As such,

[Clive Lewis]

let us start that process with a simple statement of acknowledgment on this country's prosperity: Britain did not develop the world; the world developed Britain.

5.41 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I want to concentrate on the Northern Ireland economy, as this is primarily a debate on the economy. First, however, I want to touch upon the situation in the middle east, and in particular the need for a ceasefire. I utterly condemn the actions of Hamas as terrorism. However, we must recognise that Israel's response has been disproportionate, represents collective punishment and sees ongoing breaches of international humanitarian law. We have all been deeply touched by the images we have seen on our televisions, and we know that there is a massive humanitarian crisis ongoing in Gaza.

Hopefully, we all recognise that there is no military solution to the situation. The only way forward lies in both Israel and Palestine having freedom and security, and the reaching of a political accommodation, notably with a two-state solution. Continued death and destruction achieves nothing—arguably, it makes the situation even harder, because it will only compound people's sense of bitterness and feed extremism. It also risks wider regional escalation. A ceasefire, which must include the release of hostages and humanitarian access, requires a collective international effort, as does the renewed peace process that should follow any initial ceasefire. I hope I can speak with some degree of authority on peace processes, given my experience in Northern Ireland.

Moving on to the situation in Northern Ireland, our economy continues to function and businesses are continuing to invest, but our economy is being held back massively by the absence of a devolved Executive. We need an Executive for political stability and investment in skills, infrastructure and research and development. As a former Minister for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland, I appreciate the importance of skills. Rather than further investment in those areas in Northern Ireland, we are seeing budget cuts. The impact on further and higher education is mirrored more widely in health, education and other public services.

I want to see a restored Executive working closely with the UK Government to address Northern Ireland's current financial crisis through two key interventions. The first is the introduction of what is called a fiscal floor. Northern Ireland is structurally underfunded by around £400 million a year. A fiscal floor would need to be set at the correct level, taking into account policing and justice needs based on the most relevant period, 2010 to 2015, adjusted for inflation, as that was based on actual need as assessed by the Government at that particular point. We have the precedent of what happened in Wales, fed by the Holtham commission. That model could be replicated with adjustments for Northern Ireland relatively quickly.

We also need a transformation fund. We cannot fix public services in Northern Ireland from a burning platform of cuts and further cuts. We need an invest-to-save programme for both public services and our economy, as part of a renewed financial package. Of course, we have to learn lessons from previous financial packages

in Northern Ireland. I say to the Government that I fully accept that there will be a need for a certain degree of conditionality around any intervention, but unless we have that financial package, we are never going to turn the situation around in Northern Ireland.

We have a very particular opportunity in Northern Ireland through the presence of the Windsor framework. I welcome the Government's efforts to secure it earlier this year. I am disappointed that others are failing to see the importance of that breakthrough and to return to the Executive as a consequence. Without a functioning Executive and those key interventions in our economy, we will not be able to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the framework, particularly in terms of dual market access.

Finally, I will touch briefly on climate change. It is by far the deepest, most far-reaching challenge facing the world, including us in the UK. While the Government's targets may remain, there is a clear sense that the brakes are being slammed. It is a false narrative to pitch economic wellbeing against climate change. Through a green new deal, we can address not just economic change but social justice, alongside climate change. I strongly suggest that the narrative needs to change around a green new deal, both UK-wide and in Northern Ireland.

5.46 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): One of the greatest risks we face today as a country and as a global community is the climate and ecological emergency. It is also one of the greatest risks to economic growth. We need to align UK law with what science tells us is required for a liveable future by passing the cross-party backed climate and ecology Bill. That is why I tabled amendment (e), which would deliver a science-led, joined-up strategy to build a greener, fairer future for all and prioritise the protection of nature.

The housing sector is on track to use almost 50% of the Climate Change Committee's recommended carbon budget. That trajectory is unsustainable if we are to uphold our commitments under the Paris agreement and play our part in limiting global warming to 1.5°. We need homes fit for the future. The Government have now prioritised stepping up the pace of retrofitting, driving progress towards decarbonisation while providing much-needed assistance to our constituents during the cost of living crisis.

On planning, we are told that England will soon have a new biodiversity net gain policy, which will mandate that any new development must leave biodiversity in a better state than before it was constructed. The Oxford Nature Positive Hub has exposed serious challenges that threaten the integrity of the policy's outcomes, including the oversight, monitoring and enforcement of biodiversity improvements. Under the policy, developers have three ways to offset their biodiversity liability—the damage their project does to nature—but the process will be overseen by local planning departments, which are often lacking in capacity and expertise.

We must prioritise the protection of nature. The leaders' pledge for nature was a welcome international commitment to not only halt nature loss by 2030, but set it firmly in reverse. That was also the ambition set at COP15 last December, which I attended, and which the

Government signed up to. It is the apex nature target of the climate and ecology Bill that I am proud to draw attention to via amendment (e).

I want to discuss Gaza, which the King referred to in his Gracious Speech. I, like many others, was at a Remembrance Sunday event at a local church. I was privileged to read Micah 4, which states:

“He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war any more. Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig-tree”.

Rev. Matt Broughton of St Giles then gave the eulogy. He drew attention to the fact that the same land that is being fought over now was being fought over 3,000 years ago. Micah was under threat of attack and assault, but he could see the need for peace and a peaceful settlement, and the need to turn those swords into ploughshares. He also drew attention to the fact that the only settlement would be through negotiation, as we ourselves saw in Northern Ireland and as the Spanish saw in the Basque country.

Although, as Matt Broughton said, now is a time of uncertainty, disharmony and fear, we need to look to the future and think about how we can recreate two states for two peoples. It is incumbent on us, as the UK Parliament, and on the UK Government to join the international efforts that are being made. Pedro Sánchez, the Spanish Prime Minister, has proposed that there should be a peace conference after the conclusion of the conflict. It is important that we create an intergenerational peace for the people of Israel and the people of Palestine. This is not a goal that should be seen as too lofty or too difficult. It is the only way in which we will move beyond the current conflict, and beyond the discussions we are having about the cessation of hostilities or a ceasefire. It is the only way in which we will bring peace to both peoples. Some say that there are not the partners for peace on both sides, but if we are to reach this goal, the international community must make it their top priority to find those individuals who exist in both Israel and Palestine, and promote and support them.

5.51 pm

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): In this debate we are discussing economic growth, and it is fitting that my constituency is being represented, because it has consistently delivered some of the highest economic growth in the UK, largely through being the premier distribution and logistics hub for our country. However, even in North West Leicestershire I am seeing the prosperity for which we have worked so hard being undermined by an evident lack of leadership and accountability on the Government's part. We need honest, immediate change. The Government's responsibility is to protect and serve its citizens, not to pander to the World Economic Forum, the World Health Organisation or other supranational bodies.

We appear to be sliding towards Marxism and the disruption of our traditional norms and values—our history, our religion and our institutions. What we desperately need is leadership that champions truth, freedom and economic prosperity. We are grappling with skyrocketing inflation, especially in food prices, with a looming financial crisis, out-of-control monthly

mortgage payments, and energy prices that will reach new highs this winter and increase fuel poverty across the country.

We ended up here because of fiscal profligacy with zero accountability, in addition to a decade of reckless money printing by the Bank of England. Let us look at a few of the most outrageous project losses that we have seen. HS2 has meant tens of billions lost, while useless personal protective equipment and track and trace have lost us £100 billion and £40 billion respectively. There is the financing of the war in Ukraine, which could have been brought to peace last March, while our own people struggle to make ends meet. There is the economic crash, and the stunting of economic growth because of HS2, with 22 miles of North West Leicestershire blighted for a decade. There is the decade of delay to the regeneration of Measham, my most deprived village. I am pleased that the Government have decided to reopen the Ivanhoe line between Burton-on-Trent and Leicester, but concurrent plans to terminate it at Coalville are insufficient. It needs to go all the way to Leicester so that it can benefit the South Derbyshire, North West Leicestershire and Bosworth constituencies.

Asylum seekers in hotels are costing us more than £10 million a day. I do not think it fair that, given that there are seven constituencies in Leicestershire, 51% of the asylum seekers have been located in hotels in North West Leicestershire.

Taxes are higher than they have been at any time in my life. Taxes are used to modify behaviour, which is why we penalise tax tobacco and alcohol, but we are penalising work when we want economic growth. I believe the Chancellor said, “You cannot borrow your way to economic growth,” but I did that many times when I was in business; I borrowed money, invested it in the business, grew the business, and paid the money back. It would appear that the Chancellor thinks we can tax our way to prosperity, but I do not think we will be able to do that either.

We are spending £200 million on a covid inquiry that is not asking the right questions. We need an admission from the Government and the Opposition that the flawed pandemic response was the cause of many of the problems we are suffering from now.

At a time when our country is in crisis and families are struggling to make ends meet, why do this Government persist in pressing forward with their nonsensical net zero agenda? I appreciate that the Prime Minister has announced a delay—maybe some would argue that it is a retraction—for some of the targets, but it is not enough. He needs to go further. The fact is that the UK accounts for less than 1% of global emissions, and on that basis we are voluntarily rejecting entire industries while at the same time communist China is allowed to increase its emissions by more than our total emissions in every year of this decade. If we press on with net zero, it will cost £1 trillion or possibly £3 trillion—slamming money on to the national debt in a way that our heirs and successors will not thank us for.

The debt is now completely out of control, and the global economy is on a knife edge. Many are foreseeing a major crash or another run on the banks, and this could pave the way for programmable digital central bank currencies—I hope not; I will oppose that—and a social credit scoring system. Our national debt is now £2.9 trillion. Why would we trust the central bankers

[Andrew Bridgen]

again when they have got us into trouble twice in two decades? We must immediately instate the effective fiscal process used in August 1914, whereby the financial collapse was checked by introducing a Treasury bond known as the Bradbury pound. This was accepted and it stabilised the markets at the time. It is not debt and it is not interest-bearing; it is Treasury money. We do not need to trust the central bankers; we need to use Treasury money to solve the crisis, exactly as we did in 1914.

5.56 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I will speak to amendment (b), tabled in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana), to which I am a signatory. It is a great shame that the King's Speech paid little heed to the immediate need for a ceasefire in Gaza. It is over a month since the dreadful attacks on Israeli civilians on 7 October prompted a massive wave of retaliatory violence in Gaza. Over 11,000 innocent Palestinians have been killed and over 25,000 injured. The majority of those killed and injured have been women and children, who have long been suffering the inhumane living conditions in Gaza, the largest open-air prison in the world.

Hamas's attack was contemptible and rightly condemned, but the evils committed on 7 October do not justify the disproportionate and unlawful response by Israel. The indiscriminate bombing of hospitals, bakeries and even refugee camps has maximised the suffering of the Palestinian people and driven them out of their homes. The withholding of water, food, fuel and medicine by Israel constitutes collective punishment, which is prohibited under international law. Israel has failed to respond proportionately or lawfully, and it has now killed more civilians than have been killed in all world conflicts over the last three years. It is no surprise that United Nations experts have expressed a grave concern that the people in Gaza are facing imminent genocide. Those experts have also made it clear that Israel's allies bear responsibility for the tragic situation unfolding in Gaza and that without immediate and decisive action, the Palestinian people face either death or complete displacement from their homes.

Given the terrible suffering of the people of Gaza, most of the British public now support a ceasefire—a position that is not reflected by this Government. A ceasefire is crucial to stopping the violence and allowing vital humanitarian assistance to find its way into Gaza. It is also essential to restarting a peace process that would see a secure Israel coexisting with a legitimate Palestinian state. However, on this issue the international community and the UK in particular have failed. Illegal settlers supported by the Israeli Government have, for years, seized land and property from Palestinians in the west bank, undermining the territorial integrity and sovereignty of any potential Palestinian state. Israeli forces have continually attacked worshippers at the al-Aqsa mosque in East Jerusalem, Palestinian families and businesses have been forced out of East Jerusalem, and the blockade of Gaza has continued unabated for many years. There are clearly elements within Israeli politics who have no wish or desire to see Palestinians co-exist alongside Israel, and who have used various means to prevent this from happening.

In this context, the much-needed leadership of countries such as ours in the peace process has been absent. There is still no indication of when the UK will formally recognise the state of Palestine, despite years of promises. Earlier today, we heard statements about a two-state solution. For a two-state solution there have to be two equal states, both of which have to be recognised. Of the 193 member countries of the United Nations, we are one of 55 that do not recognise Palestine. How can we talk about a two-state solution when we do not even recognise them as equals?

The Palestinian people have been abandoned, and now, in their time of greatest need, this Government cannot bring themselves to call for an immediate ceasefire. That is why, along with my colleagues in this House, I will continue to demand a ceasefire in Gaza. When half a million people taking to the streets to demand a ceasefire has been labelled by some Members as a "hate march," we realise that humanity has failed.

6.1 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in today's debate, particularly as this is my first King's Speech since having the honour of being elected as a Member of Parliament by my constituents in Chester.

As grand as the occasion was, I am disappointed by the content of the King's Speech. I have looked for what it will mean for my constituents, especially as so many continue to face the gruelling challenges of the cost of living crisis. Sadly, it offers them nothing. Proposing just 21 Bills, it is clear that the Government have simply run out of ideas. Six Bills have been carried over from the last Session, and any that were meant to address important reforms, such as the long-awaited leasehold reforms—an important issue to people across the country—appear to have been watered down from what was originally promised. We shall see.

Some promises have been completely omitted, including the shameful U-turn on banning conversion therapy. That move has abandoned LGBTQ+ people who face this abusive practice.

Change was a key theme in last week's speech, and I agree that the country is crying out for change. However, that change cannot come about with the continuation of this Conservative Government—the same Government who crashed the economy just over a year ago, plunging so many hard-working people into further uncertainty about their lives and finances. The lack of ambition in the legislative programme for the next Session simply does not address the serious challenges facing the country.

The Chancellor and the Prime Minister promised a growing economy, and instead we are seeing growth flatlining, the Bank of England downgrading its economic forecasts and the International Monetary Fund forecasting that the UK will have the lowest growth in the G7 next year.

As we have heard, taxes are the highest they have been for 70 years, with households paying a staggering £4,000 more in tax each year. Mortgages and rents have skyrocketed, with home ownership being a very distant dream for many young people. Housing is the most prominent issue facing my constituents in Chester, and the King's Speech has failed to deliver, with no sign of local housing targets or the needed reform of our planning system. It is clear that this Government have no plan to fix the housing emergency.

The worries do not stop there. They are everywhere we look. Our councils, schools, hospitals, police and fire services are all starved of resources. Local authorities are facing serious financial challenges. I know that Cheshire West and Chester Council is dealing with an unprecedented number of children in care, with never before seen levels of complexity, which will impact on all aspects of the council's finances. It did not used to be like this and it does not have to be. Labour has a plan to make working people in all parts of the country better off, by growing the economy, boosting wages and bringing down bills. Labour has a plan to retrofit 19 million homes, which presents an ambitious opportunity to boost growth, cut bills and develop skills. Labour would deliver by making Britain a clean energy superpower, building an NHS fit for the future, making Britain's streets safe and breaking down the barriers to opportunity at every stage. That is the real change that people, not only in Chester, but up and down the country, are crying out for.

6.5 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The King's Speech is yet another lost opportunity to deal with the cost of living crisis, the climate catastrophe and the scandalous underfunding of public services in my country of Cymru, Wales, and across the UK. This Government's priority remains tax cuts for a wealthy minority of the type that crashed the economy last year, which the shadow Chancellor's amendment today seeks to prevent. As the TUC has said:

"The UK is stuck in a Conservative doom loop"—

which amounts to—

"low growth, terrible living standards, and repeated doses of austerity."

Our distorted economy is still able to deliver millions of pounds to a few at the top, just so long as millions at the bottom accept living on a few crumbs here and there.

The King's Speech did nothing to deal with those problems. On pay, the Government should have pledged to legislate so that they always deliver pay rises for public sector workers that at least match inflation and provide pay restoration. We must ensure that our hard workers do not receive real-terms pay cuts again and that their salaries match real value in society. The Government must address that issue and do that in the autumn statement. On social security, we need payments to rise, but we hear that the Government plan to make new savings. They are reportedly planning to cut £4 billion from health-related benefits, which will, according to more than 100 disability organisations, plunge disabled people into poverty and could lead to unnecessary deaths. On energy bills, we have heard the Energy Secretary tell us the oil and gas stunt in the speech will not

"necessarily bring energy bills down".

What we should be doing is cutting out the vast waste of shareholder dividend payments and restoring energy provision to the public sector.

Unlike the hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Roberts), who spoke earlier, I strongly believe that we need more devolution in Wales. We need a fair needs funding settlement, devolution of the Crown Estate and the £5 billion owed to us in consequential from the HS2 England-only project—I could go on.

I want to focus my final comments on public sector funding. The Welsh Government have announced in recent weeks that they have to find savings of £600 million to balance their budget and maintain health spending. That is solely down to UK austerity and a Conservative economic agenda that harms our Welsh economy, Welsh public services and the living standards of Welsh people. One in four people in Wales are eating smaller meals or skipping meals altogether. Almost 3 million people in Britain are using food banks. As usual, it is the poorest in society who are paying the highest price, which is why I am supporting our local TUC in organising a hunger march later this month. Communities such as mine in Cynon Valley and across Rhondda Cynon Taf organised the first hunger march to London back in 1927, and it is a sad reflection on, and indictment of, our society that we are having to do the same again in 2023.

The impact of repeated rounds of austerity and the extractive nature of the economy means that there is a need and a desire to look at new economic models, at integrated community-based economic and social development. In Wales, this is being done under a vision of "Cymunedoli which translates as "communitisation" and is similar to community wealth building.

Cymunedoli is an economic model that ensures that communities own and manage their resources and labour, rather than being exploited for the benefit of others, as has long been the case throughout Welsh history. A fair, inclusive, prosperous and sustainable economy is created for the benefit of everyone, through generating and retaining wealth within local communities. The examples of cymunedoli that are being pursued in Wales are successful: local investment in jobs, paying for local training, paying local suppliers and staff, and finances recycled and retained within the local community, rather than extracted. We need to see more of that.

The Tory Government have spent 13 years cutting services and creating a cost of living crisis. That has to stop now and we need the Tories out. *Diolch yn fawr.*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Those who have participated in the debate should aim to be in the Chamber for about 6.30pm.

6.10 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): We are now facing the 14th year of Conservative rule. In that time, the Conservatives have presided over the worst growth in GDP per head since records began, a sustained decline in living standards and a huge housing crisis, while our public services are disintegrating.

It is clear that the economic policies of the past decade have totally failed to address the biggest challenges faced in our everyday society. We are in the midst of the worst pay crisis since the Battle of Waterloo. Real income is still below levels of 2010. In fact, our entire economic system is a stagnant, economic disaster zone—as the New Economics Foundation has put it,

"a stitch-up between large, distant institutions and large, distant corporations."

My constituents in Ilford South feel the full force of this economic malaise every day, whether it be in the shops, navigating the ever-growing prices of basic goods with an ever-shrinking pay packet, or perhaps most

[*Sam Tarry*]

acutely in their very homes, where they face ever-rising rents, crumbling houses and the constant threat of no-fault evictions.

The private rented sector is the worst case of this—a highly deregulated mess that has enabled rents to skyrocket as quality declines, with freeholders looking to grab as much ground rent as possible. The English Housing Survey says that almost a quarter of occupied private rented properties, amounting to nearly 1 million properties, fail the decent homes standard.

Private tenants are almost three times as likely to be exposed to damp and mould as social housing tenants. Even if the property tenants reside in is liveable, there is always the looming threat of a section 21 no-fault eviction. Since the Government first promised to end section 21 no-fault evictions, over 70,000 households have been evicted and threatened with homelessness, and in the past few months, section 21 claims have risen by a shocking 38%. Section 21 is now a leading cause of homelessness in this country, but it can also be used as a weapon by unscrupulous landlords to quash any demands from tenants who complain about failure to meet basic standards and conditions.

While it is welcome to see that the Government are finally bringing forward the long-awaited Renters (Reform) Bill, which will end section 21 evictions, it seems to be too little, too late and appears to be indefinitely delayed. How much longer do tenants in my constituency in Ilford have to live with the constant fear of a no-fault eviction hanging over their heads?

The Bills presented in the King's Speech do nothing to address the cost of renting. The past year has seen the biggest rise in rents since records began, forcing private renters to fork out huge proportions of their income on living costs. Sandra, in my constituency, said to me recently:

“Initially, our monthly rent was at a reasonable level, but we were shocked when our landlord proposed a substantial rent increase of £450 extra per month...As law-abiding citizens who diligently pay our taxes, we find ourselves in a bewildering and unjust situation. It is disheartening to see individuals and families, who were once stable in their homes, being pushed into homelessness or temporary accommodation due to these unreasonable rent increases.”

This will be a familiar story to countless families across London, as many London MPs will know. The average advertised rent in London is now a record £2,501 per month. Record rents are a symptom of the housing crisis and a broken private rented sector. Thankfully, the Mayor of London is urging the Government to act now, because London is one of the few global cities without any form of rent controls. We can learn from international precedents to design an effective system of rent control for London. Our Labour Mayor proposed two-year rent freezes, which could save average renters in London £3,374. I hope that the Minister will consider granting the Mayor of London the powers that his counterparts in Berlin, New York and Scotland have to introduce rent controls.

This is a failing sector that has pushed more and more families into disastrous temporary accommodation. When I speak to my constituents who are trapped in temporary and emergency accommodation, I hear how they have been waiting upwards of 10 years for a

social home. As MPs, we have all heard the horror stories. This is a complex issue, with no silver bullet. The long-awaited and yet further delayed Renters (Reform) Bill is a welcome step in the right direction, but it does not go far enough. It does nothing to tackle excessive rent increases and it fails to close loopholes that will allow unscrupulous landlords to continue to exploit tenants. If this Government, and indeed any future Government, are serious about tackling this crisis, they must go further. They should give local leaders the power to issue rent controls and empower tenants with proper rights and guarantees. We need more Becontree estates, once homes fit for heroes, not Battersea power station monuments with luxury flats for the super-rich.

6.15 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on His Majesty's first King's Speech.

The Prime Minister was right to say in his response last week that the country needs change, but if the people of Portsmouth needed any more evidence that this change will not come through a fifth Tory term, this King's Speech provided it. It contained more words than any since 2005, yet had the fewest Bills since 2014, and is a perfect symbol for the latest incarnation of Conservative Government that our country is having to endure. It is a party that governs with slogans rather than actions, and that promises to level up, to provide strong and stable Government, to grow our economy, and to cut NHS waiting lists, but the reality is that for more than a decade now the only thing that this Government have provided is an impeccable record of over-promising and under-delivering.

People in Portsmouth are facing serious challenges after a decade of Conservative Government and decline, with skyrocketing mortgages, rising rents, soaring bills, and taxes at their highest level for 70 years. It was sad but not surprising to see this week that the number of food bank parcels issued in Portsmouth by the Trussell Trust has risen by nearly 70% over the past year.

People are really struggling. This King's Speech could have focused on tackling these huge problems, but instead there was nothing to help people with the cost of living crisis; nothing to tackle rising levels of shoplifting, which are now topping 1,000 incidents per day; nothing to finally stop the sewage pollution; nothing to ensure that every child succeeds and thrives; nothing to secure the investment that our community deserves; and nothing to address the fact that there is only one dentist and GP for every 2,300 people in Portsmouth. Those are the priorities of the people of Portsmouth, those are my priorities and those will be the priorities of the next Labour Government. Sadly, though, at the moment we have to live with a Prime Minister who has given up on governing, who is content to carry on with the failures of the past decade, and whose idea of change is bringing back a failed Prime Minister from a decade ago.

With so few Bills included in the King's Speech, there is absolutely no excuse for some of its omissions. Much-needed Bills on mental health, for renters and to support victims have been dropped. The failure to ban so-called conversion therapy represents a complete betrayal of all LGBT+ people at risk of this abhorrent treatment.

We should be clear: conversion practices are abuse and it is nothing short of disgraceful that they have not been outlawed yet.

Where this Government seek to sow division, Labour will unite the country, offering people hope around a mission to get Britain's future back: by getting Britain building again to deliver transformational infrastructure and homes for millions; by switching on green energy to create jobs, cut bills and boost energy security; by getting the NHS back on its feet so that everyone can access a dentist and GP when they need it; by ending the Tory sewage scandal so that our waters can be clean again; by taking back our streets, with 13,000 more police officers tackling crime; and by breaking down barriers to opportunity so that young people's futures are not defined by the circumstances they are born into.

The people of Portsmouth want new ideas and a plan to get our country's future back and to bring about the change in my city and our country that is so desperately needed. This damp squib of a King's Speech shows that that change will not come with the Tories. It is becoming ever clearer that the Tory party is out of energy, out of ideas and—hopefully, for all our sakes—soon to be out of Government.

6.20 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend, the new Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern), on an excellent and important maiden speech. I hope he will continue to serve the people of Mid Bedfordshire for many years to come.

I want to talk first about housing, because that is the issue on which I receive the most casework in my constituency inbox. In recent years we have seen an escalation of section 21 notices, extortionate increases in private rents and a general increase in household costs. It is vital that the Conservative Government end the freeze on local housing allowance.

I am also extremely concerned about the level of homelessness, the demands on social housing providers in Stockport, and the financial demand on my local authority of meeting emergency and temporary housing costs. Stockport has seen a significant increase in homelessness: more than 2,300 households sought assistance from the council in 2022-23—an increase of 22% on the previous year—and, sadly, I see that trend becoming worse.

Stockport is the best place to live in England, but private rents have shot up in recent years. The housing emergency is now a full-blown crisis; it is placing those on low incomes in a very difficult place, and the Conservative Government are failing them. A constituent contacted me recently because her rent had shot up from £600 to £900 per month, causing her immense financial hardship. That rent increase seems entirely unreasonable. She now faces an eviction via section 21 notice from a home she has lived in for 15 years, at a time of her life when she should feel secure and comfortable in her own home.

The current housing emergency cannot be fixed overnight, but ending the freeze on the local housing allowance would have an immediate impact on those in need ahead of another difficult winter for the nation. People deserve the security and opportunity to get on in life, but under the Conservatives the foundations of a good life are crumbling. Homeowners face eye-watering

mortgage rates, young people are struggling to get on the housing ladder and the dream of home ownership has been snatched away from so many people who are stuck paying unaffordable private rents. Labour's plan for secure homes will put an end to the Tories' housing emergency, and we support fundamental reform of the private rented sector.

I also want to cover NHS waiting lists. I recently spoke to a constituent regarding her mother, who is in a care home. In Stockport, unfortunately, the wait for an assessment by NHS continence services is 31 weeks, which is far too long. My constituent, whose mother is 90, contacted me in distress regarding the very long period of time her mother had to wait to get an assessment. I am told that the assessment should take no longer than 12 weeks, but in this case it took 31. That is a very serious matter and I will write to the Department of Health and Social Care about it.

There are almost 8 million people on NHS waiting lists in England. The Prime Minister promised to cut those waiting lists, yet last month they rose to a record high of 7.7 million people, meaning that one in seven people are currently waiting for NHS treatment. That is simply unacceptable.

I recently wrote to all NHS-registered dental practices in my constituency, asking them whether they had any availability for registration for NHS treatment. In my local hospital, Stepping Hill, 365 patients had to visit A&E over the past year to get emergency treatment for tooth decay. We are in a crisis. I thank the British Dental Association for the work it is doing on this issue, but the Government have forgotten about NHS dentistry and it needs fundamental reform. From the letters and emails I have had from dentists in my constituency, I know the service is underfunded and people who cannot afford dental treatment simply do not get it; they have to do DIY dentistry at home, which is very dangerous.

On local government funding, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council—my local authority—has delivered over £140 million in savings since 2010. It is also facing further savings of £44 million by 2027-28. The current cost of living crisis, caused by the Conservative party, is having a severe impact on my constituents and on people across the borough of Stockport. The council needs much greater funding certainty from central Government, and the national local government funding settlement falls short. I call on the Treasury to address that urgently.

I will finish with a comment about Respect for Shopworkers Week, which is this week. We have seen a significant rise in physical and verbal attacks and threats against shop workers. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—my trade union, as a former retail worker—is campaigning on that issue, and the Government need to bring in legislation to address it.

We need a general election now so that we can replace this tired Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): This will be the last Back-Bench contribution before the wind-ups.

6.25 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The King's Speech was an opportunity for the Government to address the serious issues facing the country. Instead, it

[Margaret Greenwood]

offered little in the way of hope for the millions waiting for NHS appointments, for the millions struggling to pay their bills, or for the millions of adults who struggle to read and write; and it dashed the hopes of everyone who is concerned about the climate emergency.

The NHS is in crisis, with more than 7 million people on waiting lists for routine treatment in England. Government spending on health has not kept pace with need. “The Rational Policy-Maker’s Guide to the NHS”, published by The 99% Organisation, presents the average annual change in per capita health spending—adjusted for population and demographic factors—by UK Governments since 1979. It shows that the Labour Government between 1997 and 2010 oversaw an average annual increase in per capita health spending of 5.67%. However, there was an annual average reduction of 0.07% under the coalition Government, and the Conservatives presided over a reduction of 0.03% between 2015 and 2021. Tory austerity is destroying our NHS.

This year, integrated care boards are required to make average efficiency savings of an eyewatering 5.8% at a time when we have massive waiting lists. Not only does that deliver misery to millions of patients, but it is damaging the economy, as people waiting for vital treatment have their recovery delayed, and so too their return to work. A Government who fail the NHS fail the economy, so I urge the Government to change tack and use the autumn statement to provide the NHS with the resources it needs.

Our levels of poverty and inequality are a source of shame and need to be addressed urgently. More than 14 million people in the UK, including 4.2 million children and 2.1 million pensioners, were living in poverty in 2021-22—about 1 million more people than in the previous year. Analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that an estimated 1.8 million UK households, containing nearly 3.8 million people, including a million children, experienced destitution at some point in 2022. Shockingly, the study found that rates of destitution have more than doubled in the last five years as a result of benefit cuts and cost of living pressures. Paul Kissack, chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, said that the Government are “choosing not to” act. Olivier De Schutter, the UN’s special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, described poverty levels in the UK as “simply not acceptable” and said that the Government are violating international law.

OECD figures suggest that, compared with European Union countries, the UK has high levels of income inequality. Poverty and inequality are not inevitable; they can be addressed through progressive taxation, social security and investment in skills and education. The Government should start by abolishing the two-child limit and increasing child benefit. A Government who keep a large proportion of the population in poverty and ill health are a Government who have failed.

Illiteracy among adults is another driver of poverty and inequality. In the King’s Speech, the Government have yet again ignored the 7.1 million adults in England—one in six, or 16.4% of the adult population—who are functionally illiterate. Poor literacy skills make it harder for people to get good jobs, find and secure decent housing, and access services and use public transport, and it impacts on the wellbeing and educational

development of their children, too. I call on the Government to carry out a review of adult literacy levels, and to come forward with strategy to improve them.

The climate and ecological emergency that we are facing affects us all, yet this irresponsible Government have announced a Bill that will support the future licensing of new oil and gas fields. It is sheer folly for the Government to be prioritising fossil fuels when we face climate disaster. The challenge we face is immense, and we need a Government who will invest in home-grown clean power and insulate 19 million homes, as Labour would do.

The Government have still not come forward with an outright ban on underground coal gasification, a risky technology to extract fossil fuels that has the potential to destroy the important ecosystem of the Dee estuary in my constituency. My constituents are adamant, as am I, that they do not want to see UCG under the Dee. Nor have the Government come forward with an outright ban on fracking—again, something that my constituents and I are opposed to. I call on the Government to ban both those technologies once and for all as a matter of urgency.

This King’s Speech shows a Government who have no intention of addressing these very serious issues: the future of the NHS, poverty, inequality, the cost of living crisis, illiteracy in adults and the climate crisis.

6.30 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate this afternoon. In particular, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) on his brilliant maiden speech; it is great to see him here today. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the Chairs of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and the Petitions Committee, for their contributions on behalf of their Committees.

We heard excellent speeches from many colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), for Birmingham, Hall Green (Tahir Ali), for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon), for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter), for Ilford South (Sam Tarry), for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood). That long list shows the importance that Opposition Members place on growing the economy on the bedrock of fiscal responsibility. We heard that, from skills to housing, infrastructure to net zero and public services to poverty and inequality, there were a whole host of issues missing from the King’s Speech that we would put into a Labour King’s Speech if we were to win the next general election.

I am pleased to conclude the debate on behalf of the Opposition this evening. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I was appointed to the shadow Cabinet just

over two months ago, yet even within my short tenure, I already find myself in a position to welcome a second Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), to her place. As I said earlier, I look forward to holding her to account for what No. 10 has described as her core task, which is to grow the economy.

We all know that any number of Conservative reshuffles will not hide the failures of the past 13 years of Conservative government. Indeed, the latest Conservative Prime Minister is so keen to remind us of the past 13 years of Conservative failure that he has decided to bring back one of the Conservatives' failed former Prime Ministers as his Foreign Secretary—a promotion that we can only assume is a testament to the lack of available talent on the Government Benches.

Let us look at the King's Speech and the prospects for our economy. The good news is that the latest Conservative Prime Minister keeps telling the country that his plan is working. Indeed, he thinks it is working so well that he did not put anything meaningful on the economy in the King's Speech at all. The bad news is that, while the Conservatives tell the country that everything is fine, we all know from our own lives that that is not the case and that their plan has failed. We see the cost of living, the cost of our rent and mortgages, the spending power of the pound in our pocket, and public services so close to broken that many people have given up trying to access them at all.

The latest Conservative Prime Minister might have his head in the sand, but we all know that the Conservatives' plan is not working, because nothing is working in our country, which begs the question, why? The Chancellor is taking more money from us than ever before, thanks to 25 Conservative tax rises in this Parliament alone, but most of that extra cash is being spent on paying the interest on our national debt, to the tune of a whopping £112 billion in 2022-23 alone, which is more than we spend on our schools.

Why? Because for year after year of the past 13 years of Conservative failure on the economy, the Tories have had to borrow more and more money to cover up their failures—not just in response to Brexit, covid or the energy crisis, but in each and every year since they came to power in 2010. Let me tell you, Mr Deputy Speaker: it is working people who pay the price, not just through their taxes but through a lack of access to good-quality public services. People across the country will be saying, "We have never paid so much and gotten so little in return."

How do we get ourselves out of this high-tax, high-debt spiral of Tory failure on the economy? The short answer, of course, is for the latest Conservative Prime Minister to call an election so that a Labour Government can be given the chance to clear up the Tories' mess for them. The longer answer, and Labour's plan, is to grow the economy so that working people are better off, because all the Prime Minister managed to reveal in the King's Speech was his empty hand. There was no planning reform to get Britain building, no pension reform to kick-start investment in Britain, no industrial strategy and no new skills policy to help train workers for the jobs of tomorrow, nor were there any fairer choices on tax, such as ending non-dom status. Those are all Labour policies that sit on a bedrock of our mission for the country.

As we have heard repeatedly, this Government are out of touch and out of ideas. Only Labour has a plan to grow the economy, boost wages, bring down bills and make working people better off. Prosperity for every corner of our country can happen only with political and economic stability. That is why we invite Conservative Members to join us in the Aye Lobby this evening to vote for our amendment, which would give new statutory powers to the independent Office for Budget Responsibility—an uncontroversial amendment that should not trouble any Member on the Conservative Benches. It aims to prevent from happening again what the former failed Conservative Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), did this time last year when she crashed the economy.

That is why a Labour Government will introduce tough new fiscal rules to create solid foundations for growth—never again the Tory way, playing fast and loose with the economy and leaving working people paying sky-high mortgages. We will roll up our sleeves and partner with business, rather than stepping aside and letting investment relocate overseas. We will modernise our public services so that they work for patients, parents and public servants once again, and we will get Britain building, rather than allow outdated planning laws and ongoing division within the Conservative party to hold back our country.

The unpalatable truth facing the British people is that each day this Conservative Government remain in power is another day when our country is held back from achieving its potential, and that the biggest risk to the economy is the Conservative party itself. That is why I find myself in the unusual circumstance of agreeing with the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), who was until recently the Home Secretary. She has described the leadership of the Conservative party as

"uncertain, weak, and lacking in the qualities of leadership that this country needs."

I could not agree more. Even Conservative MPs agree that the choice facing the British people at the next election is between more chaos and uncertainty under the Conservatives that leaves Britain worse off, and the security of a changed Labour party that will unleash a decade of national renewal and make working people better off once again.

6.37 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): It is an honour to participate in the debates following the first King's Speech for more than 70 years. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate, including the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) both for his warmish welcome and for his remarks. He and I are both quite new to our posts, and much as we might disagree quite fundamentally on major topics such as taxes and spending, I am sure he agrees that it is a privilege to be closing today's debate.

During my time at the Department for Work and Pensions, I saw at first hand the impact that Government decisions have on people, and the hugely positive effect that work has on households and regions. I will continue to hold that understanding as I take on my new role, and I look forward to working with Members across the House to make sure that the economy grows, that the

[*Laura Trott*]

wealth spreads, and that the Government are responsible and restrained with the public purse strings. I am sure the hon. Gentleman recognises, as I do, that the Chief Secretary's job is a vital one that shows a clear difference between our two parties, and I am sure we will have robust discussions in the months ahead. I very much look forward to those opportunities.

We live in a changing world. Even since this Government set out their previous legislative agenda in 2022, we have seen huge upheavals. Putin's appalling war in Ukraine has now dragged into another year of suffering and brave defiance; the terrorist actions of Hamas in the middle east have caused unspeakable suffering in Israel and Gaza; and all the while, the spectre of inflation haunts the globe, as the financial echoes of Putin's war, covid-19 and the global financial crisis continue to ring out. What will work to address them is the careful, deliberate efforts that this Government are pursuing, which we will continue in the Chancellor's forthcoming autumn statement. This is what the Government have done ever since we came to power, and this is what the King's Speech does now.

Before I turn to the measures in the King's Speech, it is worth taking a look at what this Government have already achieved. We came to power with a duty to tackle what was then the worst recession since the second world war: 2.5 million people were unemployed and 1.4 million were stuck on out-of-work benefits. What has changed since 2010? Unemployment is down by 1 million people, and 1.7 million have been able to lift themselves out of poverty thanks to a new living wage.

While many in the EU are experiencing a recession, here in the UK, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) regularly points out, since 2010 we have grown faster than France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Japan, and our recovery from the pandemic has been one of the strongest in the G7. We have grown our economy by 65%, and cut our emissions by almost 50% since 1990. Perhaps most impressive of all, we have done this while slashing our borrowing by 70% between 2010 and the start of the pandemic. This is what a Conservative Government deliver.

Here I should consider the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), although I will be brief as Opposition Members did not cover it much. If their amendment had been in force in 2020, we surely would have found ourselves in a much worse position. It would have hampered the Government from acting in an emergency, as we did during the pandemic, because instead of taking decisive action to support people and businesses up and down the United Kingdom, we would have been forced into a 12-week process with the OBR before we were able to deliver any support whatsoever. I am sure even Opposition Members would recognise that that is not an optimal outcome. Indeed, the Opposition seem to have put forward a plethora of new spending commitments today prior to an updated OBR forecast, which I would suggest is not in the spirit of their own amendment.

Turning to some of the measures mentioned today, the shadow Chancellor criticised the lack of action on the cost of living, yet did not once mention inflation.

It is up there with the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) forgetting the deficit. Getting inflation down is the ultimate solution to the cost of living pressures we face. It requires disciplined, unglamorous work, which means keeping inflationary spending down. There was not one proposal in the shadow Chancellor's speech to address it. It is true that she did not mention the deficit-busting, inflation-producing £28 billion of borrowing in her speech, but that is another Labour policy well overdue for a U-turn.

Key to driving non-inflationary growth will be boosting trade. The Brexit zombies on the SNP Benches fail to recognise the potential of the trade deals we have with the rest of the world. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset and my hon. Friends the Members for Crawley (Henry Smith) and for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) know the benefits that our open, international, free trading stance will bring. Deals such as the CPTPP with the fastest-growing economies in the world will deliver the clear benefits of Brexit, and we should be talking them up, not down.

Indeed, there was too much talking down in the debate today. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked who is better off. I will tell him who is better off: the 1.7 million people who have been taken out of poverty since 2010, the 200,000 pensioners taken out of poverty, those helped by the 40% drop in youth unemployment, those for whom it now pays to go out to work, children learning in schools that are more likely to be good or outstanding and, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said, the low-paid, the number of whom has dramatically fallen since the national living wage was introduced. Since 2015, the proportion of people on low pay has halved.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Sir Simon Clarke), with whom I hope to engage a lot as I hugely respect the work he did as Chief Secretary to the Treasury, pointed out the dramatic impact that a Conservative Government and a Conservative Mayor, the brilliant Ben Houchen, have had on Teesside. He talked about Labour's legacy there as one of mediocrity and failure, and he is right. With steelmaking back, carbon capture and storage, and a new net zero power station, this is levelling up in action, and that is what a Conservative Government deliver.

Turning to growth and supply side reform, which lots of people have mentioned today, at the spring Budget we announced a comprehensive employment package designed to remove the barriers that are preventing people from getting back into work. This is the welfare reform that was called for by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and others. At the autumn statement, the Government will announce a package of long-term measures, creating an investment economy by unlocking business investment.

I welcome the remarks by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) about the digital network Bill and the importance of broadband. I am glad to have heard the hon. Members for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) and for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) bring up childcare. This is an important measure for growth as well as the right thing to do, and I hope that they welcome our £200 million investment. I do not think that the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood

is in her place, but I note her remarks on sodium valproate and will make sure that they are fed into the Health team. That was very important.

On the supply side, many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Burnley, for Burton (Kate Kniveton) and for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart), the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, talked about the importance of transport in their local areas and of protecting consumers travelling by air.

Housing has been brought up by a number of Members. We are on track to deliver the 1 million houses over this Parliament, and the Chancellor is looking at what more we can do to support planning reform, particularly on infrastructure. I was slightly incredulous to hear the Opposition talk about boosting housing when they have just blocked a measure that would have added 100,000 much-needed homes. Being in opposition is as much about what to support as it is about what to oppose, and that was a mistake. However, I welcome the Opposition's support, albeit grudging, for the Renters (Reform) Bill and the leasehold Bill.

Before I close, I should mention the brilliant maiden speech by the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern), whose beautiful constituency we have all been seeing a little bit too much of recently. It was a gracious and accomplished maiden speech that spoke to his decency in the way he conducted the campaign. I wholeheartedly agree with him that there is nothing better than to represent the place in which one grew up. It is the world's greatest privilege. This place, across the House, does an enormous amount of good. I hope and expect that the family, colleagues and friends that he brought along today were proud to see his excellent speech, and I look forward to further contributions.

We are taking the actions that will make this country better. The King's Speech aims to push the UK into the spotlight on the international stage, embracing our role as a champion of global free trade, open for business and investment from around the world. Just look at our decision to scrap HS2, a one-route project where the right decision was postponed and kicked down the road as costs mounted up. The £36 billion that we are saving by cancelling HS2 will be reinvested to deliver Network North, improving journeys and infrastructure between and within the towns and cities of the north and the midlands, instead of just giving the people of the north a quicker way to move south.

The legislative agenda cuts through the noise of those who want to talk Britain down, who speak freely about our challenges but are tight lipped on solutions, and provides clarity, certainty and stability for those who need it most.

The last years have not been easy; the coming ones will offer their own challenges. I understand those who want to wish those truths away, but this Government's instinct is to treat the public like adults. It is important that the public understand the challenges that we face, so that they can understand the changes we have made to safeguard their future. This Government's legislative agenda recognises that, balancing the delivery of both security and opportunity. The Government have a track record and a long-term plan to do just that, and I am hugely proud to play my part as Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

That is why we will deliver licences for fresh oil and gas fields, continue to work to halve inflation and bring forward the trade Bill, cementing our place in the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, locking in long-term rights for UK firms to do business in the fastest growing region of the world.

None of this is easy. These decisions involve tough trade-offs, but because of our history of delivery and our long-term plan for the future captured in this King's Speech, I know that the Government can achieve their aims for this country and help every part of the country to reach its potential. I commend the Loyal Address, unamended, to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): For those who are a bit rusty on King's Speech procedure, I hope to assist. I will put only the amendment in the name of the Opposition today. Other questions will be put tomorrow.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 228, Noes 314.

Division No. 1]

[6.49 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie	David, Wayne
Ali, Rushanara	Day, Martyn
Ali, Tahir	De Cordova, Marsha
Amesbury, Mike	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Anderson, Fleur	Dixon, Samantha
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Dodds, Anneliese
Bardell, Hannah	Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)
Barker, Paula	Dowd, Peter
Beckett, rh Margaret	Duffield, Rosie
Begum, Apsana	Dyke, Sarah
Benn, rh Hilary	Eagle, Dame Angela
Betts, Mr Clive	Eagle, rh Maria
Black, Mhairi	Eastwood, Colum
Blackford, rh Ian	Edwards, Jonathan
Blackman, Kirsty	Edwards, Sarah
Blomfield, Paul	Efford, Clive
Bonnar, Steven	Elliott, Julie
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Elmore, Chris
Bridgen, Andrew	Eshalomi, Florence
Brock, Deidre	Esterson, Bill
Brown, Alan	Evans, Chris
Bryant, Sir Chris	Farron, Tim
Buck, Ms Karen	Farry, Stephen
Burgon, Richard	Fellows, Marion
Byrne, Ian	Flynn, Stephen
Byrne, rh Liam	Fovargue, Yvonne
Cadbury, Ruth	Foxcroft, Vicky
Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Furniss, Gill
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Gardiner, Barry
Carden, Dan	Gibson, Patricia
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Gill, Preet Kaur
Chamberlain, Wendy	Glindon, Mary
Champion, Sarah	Grady, Patrick
Cherry, Joanna	Grant, Peter
Cooper, Daisy	Green, Sarah
Cooper, rh Yvette	Greenwood, Lilian
Cowan, Ronnie	Greenwood, Margaret
Crawley, Angela	Griffith, Dame Nia
Creasy, Stella	Haigh, Louise
Cruddas, Jon	Hamilton, Fabian
Cryer, John	Hanvey, Neale
Cummins, Judith	Hardy, Emma
Cunningham, Alex	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Daby, Janet	Harris, Carolyn
Dalton, Ashley	Hayes, Helen

Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hosie, rh Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Linden, David
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lynch, Holly
 MacAskill, Kenny
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahan, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moran, Layla
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Murray, James
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nichols, Charlotte

Nicolson, John (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Lucy
 Qaisar, Ms Anum
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, Steve
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Shanks, Michael
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Alyn
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Sobel, Alex
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Strathern, Alistair
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Wakeford, Christian
 Webbe, Claudia
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows*)
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Munira
 Winter, Beth
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Colleen Fletcher and
 Gerald Jones

NOES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aiken, Nickie
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atherton, Sarah
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Shaun
 Baillie, Siobhan
 Baker, Duncan
 Baker, rh Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Baron, Mr John
 Baynes, Simon
 Bell, Aaron
 Benton, Scott
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, rh Sir Jake
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brereton, Jack
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Britcliffe, Sara
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, rh Sir Conor
 Butler, Rob
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Carter, Andy
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, rh Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Sir Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, rh David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip

Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 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
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, rh Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, rh John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, rh James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Higginbotham, Antony

Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, rh Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, rh Gillian
 Kniveton, Kate
 Kruger, Danny
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote cast by John Redwood*)
 Mackrory, Cheryl
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, rh Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Milling, rh Dame Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien

Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, rh Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Mr Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, rh Rishi
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek

Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tuckwell, Steve
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne

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, rh Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:

Mike Wood and

Robert Largan

Question accordingly negatived.

7.6 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed tomorrow.

Business Without Debate

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Secretary Alister Jack relating to Constitutional Law.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Carer's Assistance (Carer Support Payment) (Scotland) Regulations 2023 (Consequential Modifications) Order 2023, which was laid before this House on 16 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, I will take motions 3, 4 and 5 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

UNITED KINGDOM INTERNAL MARKET

That the draft United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 (Services Exclusions) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 20 July, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

COUNCIL TAX

That the draft Representation of the People (Postal Vote Handling and Secrecy) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 11 September, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Persistent Organic Pollutants (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Joy Morrissey.)*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr John Baron be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Dame Andrea Jenkyns be added.—*(Sir Bill Wiggin.)*

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE
NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Ordered,

That Tobias Ellwood be discharged from the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy and Robert Courts be added.—*(Sir Bill Wiggin.)*

PETITIONS

**Planning permission for telecommunication
telegraph pole installation**

7.8 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): We have a unique situation in Hull and East Riding where three different broadband companies are installing broadband infrastructure at the same time, and they are not sharing with each other or the existing provider. This has resulted in telegraph poles being put up in areas that have never had them, or multiple sets in areas where they already exist. Existing legislation allows this to happen with the local planning authority and residents having no say in the matter. Residents want to be consulted about what happens in their own street.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that telegraph poles being erected by designated communications network operators for the expansion of Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) broadband do not need planning permission under the Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) 2003 and the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015; that the only requirement on the operator is 28 days notice to the Local Planning Authority (LPA) that there is no requirement to consider alternatives such as under-street cabling; that the LPA can only make suggestions on siting which the telecoms company is under no obligation to follow; that there is no requirement to inform residents of the installation and so no opportunity

for them to inform the process; that the first knowledge residents will have of a telegraph pole being installed is when it appears in their street or outside their residence.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to make statutory requirements for designated communications network operators to apply for permission to the LPA on any proposed installation of telegraph poles and for the LPA to consult with affected residents before issuing any permissions.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002872]

A5 Traffic Volume Hockliffe

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I rise to present the petition of the villagers of Hockliffe on the volume of traffic from the A5 that goes through their village. I thank Councillor Rob Scott, the chair of the parish council, and Peter Edwards OBE, who helped to put the petition together. Residents complain of vibrations so bad that objects are falling off shelves, firms are losing business because customers cannot get through, and parents are worried about their children walking to school because of drivers mounting the pavements. Nearly 85% of the residents of Hockliffe signed the petition, which states:

The petition of the residents of the village of Hockliffe,

Declares that the unacceptable volume of traffic now using the A5 trunk road through the village of Hockliffe endangers the health, safety and well being of residents and negatively impacts local businesses; further declares that Hockliffe, with over 400 homes, uniquely has the A5 trunk road passing through its centre; notes that the 2017 M1A5 link road provided relief for Dunstable but the impact on Hockliffe was greatly underestimated with over 20,000 vehicles now passing daily through the village; many of them HGVs; further notes that the 4-way traffic lights in the centre of Hockliffe cannot cope with this volume of traffic, leading to constant congestion and lengthy tailbacks in all directions, with noise and fumes from stationary traffic affecting the health and well being of residents; notes that pedestrians and motorists suffer dangers from frustrated drivers mounting pavements, racing to beat the lights or performing U turns to avoid the stationary or slow moving traffic; further notes that many M1 closures, due to accidents or maintenance, divert traffic to the A5 and this leads to gridlock through Hockliffe, day or night; further declares that Hockliffe residents often suffer sleep disruption due to HGV traffic, especially during M1 closures or restrictions that, when completed, the new A6/M1 link road, and a growing number of HGV logistics parks and new homes in the local area, will all add to an already unacceptable traffic problem affecting the A5 through the village of Hockliffe.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to convene all appropriate and necessary parties in order to find an early solution to the unacceptable traffic volume, congestion and associated dangers on the A5 trunk road through the village of Hockliffe, Bedfordshire and that this is urgently progressed.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002874]

Bridges in London: Maintenance Funding

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

7.13 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting my request for a debate on the funding of London bridges. I am proud to be a River Thames MP, with Putney bridge a major and much-loved landmark as well as an essential road route in my constituency. However, it is not Putney bridge but the closure of Hammersmith bridge and its huge impact across London that brings me here this evening.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. More than a year ago I asked the then roads Minister, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), for a meeting to discuss the repair of Hammersmith bridge. I followed up that request on at least six occasions, but he had not replied by the time he was reshuffled yesterday. I did, however, receive a reply to my letter to the Secretary of State for Transport after the cancellation of the future stages of HS2. I had asked for a little of the £36 billion to be redirected to Hammersmith bridge, given that 0.5% of that would pay the full cost, and we know that the Department for Transport typically pays between 80% and 90% for strategic road schemes. Does my hon. Friend agree that the only reason the bridge has not been repaired is that the Government refuse to pay more than a third of the cost, and cash-strapped local authorities cannot meet a bill running into hundreds of millions of pounds?

Fleur Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. He puts the case very well that finance is available, that it could come from the money allocated for HS2 funding for south-east roads and that Hammersmith and Fulham Council cannot be expected to pay a third of the costs for this bridge, which are very high and rising. He has summarised my speech very well but it will be going ahead, and I hope that the Minister will respond by using this opportunity to at last announce the funding for the reopening of the bridge. Here we are, my hon. Friend and I, representing both sides of the river and both seeing the impact that this is having on our constituents.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I look forward to hearing more of the hon. Member's speech on this vexed topic, but I feel a sense of déjà vu because we have all been here before. As she and the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) know, my constituents have also been badly affected by this closure. They are prevented from accessing schools, medical facilities and public transport on the other side of the bridge in Hammersmith, and that is having a really damaging impact on the local community, particularly in Barnes, but while I am concerned about my constituents, it is having an impact on the much wider geography. Does she agree that it is affecting not just Barnes, Hammersmith and Putney but the whole of south-west London? It is a vital strategic route across the river—of which we do not have enough—and its closure is causing lengthy tailbacks and congestion in a large area across west London and south-west London, and the wider south-east and Surrey in particular.

Fleur Anderson: I absolutely agree with my constituency neighbour. This shows not only the cross-party support for the reopening of the bridge but the enormous impact that its closure is having across a wide area of London. Hammersmith bridge is a national transport route and the fact that it has been closed for so many years is a disaster for many people.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady, and I want to add my support for her request. On Monday this week, the Quoile bridge in my constituency developed a crack right down it and it is now closed. It is a major thoroughfare that carries lots of traffic, which will now be unable to go through Downpatrick on that road for a period of time. I understand the pain that the hon. Lady feels for her constituents and I offer my support to her.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I was intrigued as to how there could be a Northern Ireland aspect to Hammersmith bridge, and now we all know. Well done, Jim!

Fleur Anderson: It is a huge honour to be intervened on by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I just hope that his constituents will not have to go through the same enormous pain, the long wait and the despair about funding as our constituents in south-west London. I also hope that the Minister heard that and will look into funding for the hon. Gentleman's bridge as well. The closure of a bridge is a dreadful thing.

At every advice surgery I hold, at every visit to businesses, at every local event I go to and every time I go knocking on doors, everyone wants to know when Hammersmith bridge will be reopened. It is a grade 2 listed heritage suspension bridge. It was built in 1887 but closed to motor vehicles in April 2019 when fissures were found, making it dangerous. Boris Johnson said at Prime Minister's questions here in this place on 21 October 2020 that it would be reopened, but it is still closed. I held an Adjournment debate on the issue in June last year, with a very disappointing Government response. The restoration has still not had its funding agreed, let alone being started or finished, so I am back here again.

This is a London issue but it needs a national solution and actions that can be taken only by the Government to fund the restoration. It is a disgrace that Transport Ministers have not sorted this out. My constituents are worried that it has become a plaything of Conservative party politicking, with Conservative mayoral and parliamentary candidates and MPs standing next to the bridge saying that something will be done, and then quickly forgetting about it altogether.

The Hammersmith bridge saga has revealed systemic failures in the way that bridge maintenance is funded that need to be urgently addressed by the Minister. While the Government have dragged their feet, the estimated cost of the bridge has been hit by Conservative-fuelled inflation and the war in Ukraine, where the steel was going to be sourced, rising from the initial £140 million to an estimated £250 million. The longer the Government wait, the more the costs will rise.

The closure of Hammersmith bridge since 2019 has had a huge impact on my constituents, especially in Putney and Roehampton. An estimated 22,000 vehicles used to cross the bridge every day, as well as seven vital

[*Fleur Anderson*]

bus services. Those vehicles are now diverted through Putney, which causes high levels of pollution and congestion and long journey times.

So that the Minister can fully understand what this closure has meant for my constituents, I will tell him some of the results of my recent survey of local residents and businesses. Over 75% of business owners said that the closure has negatively impacted their business because of pollution, difficulties with deliveries, employee commutes and low morale. Some 90% of people said that the bridge closure has been “extremely disruptive” and that they feel more isolated and disconnected.

Putney suffers severe traffic jams every day, with children inhaling toxic fumes. Asthma levels are rising. Patients needing to get to a hospital in an emergency are stuck in traffic that is barely moving. It is also making cyclists and would-be cyclists less likely to cycle because of the danger and pollution on the very congested roads. People who commute through, live or work on Putney High Street, Upper Richmond Road and Lower Richmond Road know how bad things are, and they need their voices to be heard.

The Government should have stepped up back in April 2019, worked with Hammersmith and Fulham Council on the business plan and funded it, and then they should have begun the restoration works. We might then have had the bridge reopened by now. Instead, they palmed off responsibility and have played political games.

Engineering works costing £8 million started in February 2022 and will be finished in a few months—the carriageway will then be cleared for pedestrians and cyclists, which is very welcome—but the full restoration is still unfunded architects’ plans.

The Hammersmith Bridge taskforce chaired by Baroness Vere agreed a settlement of Hammersmith and Fulham Council paying a third, Transport for London paying a third and the Government paying a third, but the taskforce then did nothing else. The taskforce has not met since November 2021. No task and no force. This third-third-third structure is a very poor settlement, as neither the council nor TfL can afford a third and the Government have not yet agreed to their third. The estimated cost is £250 million, but the council’s entire annual budget is just £132 million.

A business plan was submitted by Hammersmith and Fulham Council in December 2022, proposing a toll to pay for its third but, nearly a year on, it has still not been agreed and funded by the Government. I hope the Minister can tell us what will happen. These sums are way beyond the means of an individual council. How can a council with a budget of only £132 million a year for libraries, adult social care and children’s services afford to pay for this? Where could the money come from?

When it was announced that over £4 billion had been carved out from the cancellation of HS2 for road infrastructure in the south-east of England, it was an opportunity to fund the bridge. My constituents deserve to know why Hammersmith bridge is not receiving any support from this fund, or from which fund it will receive support. If just 5% of the £4 billion budget for the south-east—that is just 6% of the overall budget—were used, Hammersmith bridge could be fixed and reopened after all these years of closure.

My constituents and people across south-west London need answers, so I hope the Minister can answer these questions today. Why is it taking so long to fund the bridge? Has a funding source been identified? When will we know that it has been funded? When will the bridge be reopened for buses and vehicles? What is being done to stop another London council having to foot such a large bill again in future?

The closure of Hammersmith bridge should be a wake-up call for the Government to reassess the state of our bridges and the broken funding settlements. I hope that the Minister will commit to looking at the ownership and funding of all London bridges, so that this Hammersmith bridge fiasco is never repeated. But why does Hammersmith and Fulham Council have responsibility for this enormously expensive bridge? The arrangements for responsibility for London bridges were established by the Local Government Act 1985, when the Greater London Council was dissolved, and we have a disorganised and messy hotchpotch of responsibilities. Some were assigned simply because of the names, and so Hammersmith and Fulham Council is responsible because the bridge is called “Hammersmith bridge”. That is a ludicrous way of assigning responsibility for a national, heritage, landmark bridge and a vital connection in our city’s transport infrastructure. It is an embarrassment that as a country we are unable to find a political solution to this crisis. Hammersmith bridge is a national infrastructure project in the greatest city in the world, and the abstention from responsibility by the Conservative Government is shocking. Would Brooklyn bridge, or any other bridge in any other capital, be allowed to remain closed to all vehicles for years and years on end? We urgently need a futureproof, reliable and sufficient stream of funding so that all our bridges are maintained for all who use them. I urge the Minister to look into reforming the funding formula for London’s bridges and river crossings, so that another council is not burdened with a bill of £250 million that it cannot afford.

London boroughs were previously able to access support for bridge maintenance from TfL’s local implementation plan, but the Government’s restrictive cuts imposed on TfL mean that that support is no longer available. That will inevitably lead to more and more bridges needlessly falling into disrepair, meaning bigger and bigger bills in the long term. So what needs to happen? TfL needs new, long-term funding certainty through a multi-year funding arrangement, which would make sure that councils can access the support they need when bridges fall into disrepair. Without this investment, costs will continue to soar, with the Conservatives kicking the can down the road for a future Government to clean up. If the Minister is still convinced that this is not his problem, I hope that the £500 million paid by Londoners in vehicle excise duty every year which is spent on roads in other parts of the country, convinces him of the need to make sure that London’s roads and bridges are maintained when they need it.

I invite the Minister to visit the bridge and I request a meeting to discuss the funding. My main ask is very straightforward—it is for the Government to do everything in their power to urgently fund the restoration and reopening of Hammersmith bridge at the earliest opportunity. I hope he will not tell me that the Government have done everything they can and that it is all up to Hammersmith and Fulham Council to step up, because

all the leadership so far has come from the council. That applies in respect of discovering the fissures in the first place; taking action to close the bridge and make it safe; the memorandum of understanding; the proposals for a cheaper bridge replacement and the first project; the business plan; and the stabilisation work. The Government must now step up to shoulder their responsibility to push this through, respond to the business plan, work with Hammersmith and Fulham Council and TfL and ensure that the restoration is finally fully funded. I also ask the Minister to review the entire funding settlement for London bridges, which has led us here, and why this most expensive of heritage bridge projects is being left to a cash-strapped local council because of a historical whim. We clearly need a new approach that safeguards our London bridges for generations to come.

7.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Guy Opperman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing this debate. I appreciate and fully understand that Hammersmith bridge is of particular interest to her constituents and to people in the constituencies throughout the south and west of London. I wish to make a few preliminary points, the first of which is that clearly there is a good pre-existing working relationship between the Department for Transport and the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.

Obviously, as the Minister, I have to choose my words relatively carefully because, as the hon. Lady will be aware, the business case for Hammersmith bridge strengthening works has been submitted to both the Department for Transport and Transport for London for review. As she will no doubt appreciate, I can only say so much tonight to avoid prejudicing any ongoing governance procedures and the borough's future procurement activity. However, I will attempt to address that.

I am uniquely acquainted with the particular bridge. I have cycled across it many times in the past. I used to live in Fulham, back in the distant days when I first became a Member here, so I am well acquainted with it. Clearly, on my first day in the Department for Transport, I am delighted to be answering the Adjournment debate on an issue that I have inherited but which I am delighted to inherit.

It would be a sad day if there were no contribution to the Adjournment debate by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I fathomed my brain to try to work out how, on a debate on "Bridges in London: Maintenance and Funding", a gentleman from Northern Ireland would wangle in a vital part of transport infrastructure that would make all the difference in the world, but he successfully did so without interruption, fear or favour, and I congratulate him on that. I look forward to his pitch, doubtless in writing, to myself, the Northern Ireland Government and various other local authorities for bridge assistance. I have visited his constituency on several occasions and I congratulate him, as always, on his support for this process.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): Given the Minister's comments about the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I assume he welcomes

interventions. I congratulate the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) on securing this important debate on the financing of roads and bridges in London. I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his place, but I hope he is aware that Government funding for roads and bridges in London is normally funnelled and channelled through Transport for London. He might be aware that the Government have already bailed out TfL to the tune of around £6 billion in the last few years, which is a significant sum of money.

I politely urge the Minister, as he gets his feet under his new desk, that he might consider channelling that money directly to the boroughs, in places like Bexley and Bromley, as I think that money would be better spent that way than through Transport for London. Can I be really cheeky and ask him to meet me, when he gets the time, to discuss my campaign to prevent the Mayor of London from tolling the Blackwall tunnel, which is one of the few crossings in south-east London?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend, who I know very well—I have visited his constituency in a former life—makes very good points. He is a doughty champion for Bexley. He follows in the famous footsteps of James Brokenshire, who we all miss and who was my boss at the Home Office for a long period. I am happy to discuss the issues he raises further. He makes an interesting point about funding going in a particular way. It would be wrong of me to make first-day commitments at the Dispatch Box, but I will take his point away and get officials to look at it with interest, and I am happy to discuss it further.

The hon. Member for Putney set out the history of Hammersmith bridge in some detail. She is right that it is a grade II listed suspension bridge, opened in 1887, and has served generations of Londoners very well for some considerable time. However, there are a few of her points with which I would gently take issue. First, let us go to the basics: the bridge is not owned by the Government; it is owned by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. It is not the responsibility of the Government. Even if people had listened to quite a lot of the speech, they may not have picked that up.

The responsibility for maintaining the bridge and making decisions on its repair lies with the borough. It is unfortunate that the bridge had to close, first to motor vehicles in 2019 and then to all users in 2020. The reason, as we know, was that the safety of those using the bridge was deemed to be of the utmost priority. The assertion was made that the Government have done nothing. I respectfully invite the hon. Lady to accept that the Government have provided nearly £10 million of funding to support the London borough, to ensure that there is remedial work and assistance on an ongoing basis. I set that out to try to correct the record.

Following the complete closure of the bridge in 2020, the DfT provided £4 million of taxpayers' money, which enabled a comprehensive investigation into the overall structure and condition of the bridge. Through this investment, world-leading engineers worked to develop a complete picture of the issues that faced the bridge. The works determined the bridge to be in better condition than first feared, leading to the bridge reopening on a temporary and controlled basis to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic. The Department for Transport has worked closely with the London Borough of Hammersmith

[Guy Opperman]

and Fulham and with Transport for London to help facilitate the reopening of the bridge to all users. In that vein, DFT established the Hammersmith bridge taskforce, which was led by the Transport Minister, Baroness Vere, as the hon. Lady outlined. The taskforce was set up in 2019 and has had many, many meetings—well over 15—since, and it was instrumental in providing a forum for interested stakeholders to work together to develop a clear course of action to resolve the immediate safety concerns around the bridge.

I know the hon. Lady has called for a further meeting of the taskforce. I want to try to address that. I assure her that when we are in a position to hold a further taskforce meeting, it will be to discuss issues of significance or change for the project, therefore ensuring that it remains a good use of stakeholders' time. However, she will be aware that we have been waiting for the business case to be submitted and that is clearly the key part.

The commitment to this project by the DFT has not stopped at the initial £4 million support provided to the authority. In the most recent TfL extraordinary funding and financing settlement of August 2022, we committed to funding up to one third of the costs shared with the borough and TfL of reopening the bridge to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic, and then, depending on costs, to buses and motor vehicles. The first part of this commitment has already been delivered. In March 2022, the Department for Transport approved the business case from the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham for the stabilisation works on the bridge, which in turn triggered the release of a further £3 million of Government funding. These works will ensure that the bridge remains open to pedestrians, cyclists and river traffic permanently, with no risk of further temporary closures due to unsafe conditions. I am pleased to say that those works are due to complete very early in the new year and will provide certainty to the pedestrians and cyclists of Barnes, Hammersmith, Fulham, Richmond and beyond that this link across the Thames will remain open.

Most recently, as all parties will be aware, the Department for Transport provided the borough with a further £2.5 million for the crucial geotechnical investigations now being carried out at Hammersmith bridge, which will pave the way for the next stage of the works. This brings the total amount of Government funding to the bridge to date of up to nearly £10 million. That is exceptional funding.

The next stage of the project is to strengthen the core and renovate other structurally significant parts of the bridge. The strengthening phase of engineering works will build on stabilisation works and, upon completion, will allow the bridge to reopen to all users. That should include buses and motor vehicles. Following close co-operation with TfL and the Department, the borough has now developed and submitted a His Majesty's Treasury Green Book outline business case for the second stage of the works to the Department for Transport, setting out the estimated cost range for strengthening the bridge. The Department is reviewing that outline business case in great detail. It was submitted in on 23 April, as I understand it, so clearly that is an ongoing process.

The hon. Member for Putney asked about the HS2 project and the funding related to it, but no decisions have been made regarding reallocation of funds.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) also raised the local implementation plan. It is true that Transport for London provides formula funding to London boroughs for transport projects, but its budget for bridge projects is just over £2 million, to be shared between 33 boroughs. That is obviously insufficient to fund this project.

Sarah Olney: The Minister stressed at the beginning of his remarks that the repair of the bridge is the responsibility of Hammersmith and Fulham. While I fully accept that, does he not think it is in the Government's interests to provide more substantial funding, because of the strategic nature of the river crossing? Would he consider the fact that, as I said earlier on, this is about more than local transport—it is a piece of strategic infrastructure? Therefore, responsibility aside, is it not in the Government's interests to provide more substantial funding?

Guy Opperman: I want to address the hon. Lady's point in brief, but I was going to come on to the legal basis. The practical reality is that, under successive Governments of different political persuasions, dating back many decades, the legal basis for this bridge and for other bridges in London is in relation to the local boroughs. It is the case, for example, that Wandsworth bridge required repair works, and in that particular case that was done by the local borough. She will be aware of the Local Government Act 1985, the Greater London Authority and the actions taken in 2000 with the mayoralty and the creation of TfL, which meant that significant roads became the specific responsibility of TfL.

With no disrespect, the A306, which runs over Hammersmith bridge, is a local road, as are, effectively, most of London's bridges. I make the point again: under the Highways Act 1980 and various other Acts under successive Governments—this is not the work of one particular Government—these bridges and roads are associated with the local authority. I take the point the hon. Lady makes, and it is for that reason that the Government have spent over £10 million progressing matters as we have done thus far.

With no disrespect either to the hon. Member for Putney, who seemed to suggest there was nothing the Government have done and that it was all down to the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, the £10 million has been paid over a series of years to get to the hurdles that we have necessarily got to, and an agreement was entered into at an earlier stage. I do not believe I can add anything further, other than to congratulate her on securing the debate and highlighting the issue, which clearly affects her constituents and others in west London. I continue to assure her that the Department will provide support to both the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and to TfL on the bridge project as it goes ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

7.41 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 14 November 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Industrial Action: Minimum Service Levels

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): Earlier this year Parliament passed the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023. The Act seeks to balance the ability of workers to strike with the rights and freedoms of the public to go about their daily lives, including getting to work and accessing key services.

Most major European countries, such as France, Italy and Spain, have had some form of minimum service level regime for many years, and organisations such as the International Labour Organisation have recognised that such approaches can be an appropriate way of balancing the ability to strike with the rights of the wider public.

Where minimum service level regulations are in place, the Act requires trade unions to take “reasonable steps” to ensure that their members who are identified in a work notice do not take strike action during the periods in which they are required by the work notice to work and comply with the work notice.

During the passage of the Act, the Government committed to bring forward a statutory code of practice setting out more detail on the “reasonable steps” that trade unions should take.

I am pleased to inform the House that yesterday we laid a statutory code of practice on reasonable steps to be taken by a trade union (minimum service levels) in Parliament for approval. This follows a public consultation on the draft code and careful consideration of the feedback received. A Government response to that consultation was also published yesterday.

The code of practice is issued under section 203 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 and sets out four steps that trade unions should take to meet the legal requirement under the Act:

Step 1: Identification of members—Trade unions should identify those of their members who are identified in a work notice;

Step 2: Encouraging individual members to comply with a work notice—Trade unions should send an individual communication or notice to each member identified in a work notice to advise them not to strike during the periods in which they are required by the work notice to work, as well as to encourage them to comply with the work notice.

Step 3: Picketing—Picket supervisors will be instructed by the trade union to use reasonable endeavours to ensure that picketers avoid, so far as reasonably practicable, trying to persuade members who are identified in a work notice not to cross the picket line at times when they are required by the work notice to work;

Step 4: Assurance—Once a work notice is received by the union, trade unions should ensure that they do not do other things that undermine the steps they take to meet the reasonable steps requirement.

Subject to parliamentary approval, the code will be issued and brought into effect by the Secretary of State in accordance with the procedure set out in section 204 of the 1992 Act.

We will also shortly publish separate, non-statutory guidance on the issuing of work notices in relation to minimum service levels.

[HCWS32]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Tackling Crime and Antisocial Behaviour

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I am pleased to set out to the House the Government’s response to three consultations that have informed provisions in the Criminal Justice Bill that is being introduced in the House of Commons today.

Government response to the public consultation “Strengthening the law enforcement response to serious and organised crime”

The Home Office ran a public consultation from 24 January to 21 March 2023 that sought views on two legislative proposals to tackle serious and organised crime. Following the consultation, the Criminal Justice Bill will give effect to two legislative measures, as follows:

1. The creation of new offences to criminalise the importing, making, adapting, supplying, offering to supply and possession of specific articles for use in serious crime. These articles are:

- vehicle concealments used to conceal goods and people;
- templates used to 3D-print firearm components; and
- pill presses.

2. Strengthening and improving the functioning of serious crime prevention orders (SCPOs) by:

- increasing the number of bodies which can apply to the High Court for an SCPO in the absence of a conviction to include the National Crime Agency, the police, British Transport Police, Ministry of Defence Police, and HM Revenue and Customs;
- empowering the Crown Court to issue an SCPO on acquittal;
- introducing an express power to include electronic monitoring as a condition of an SCPO; and
- prescribing a set of notification requirements for all SCPOs.

Law enforcement agencies frequently encounter articles that they suspect are being used in serious crime but which they are unable to act on under existing legislation. The Government must continue to give law enforcement agencies the tools and powers they need to disrupt and dismantle organised crime groups and those who knowingly enable them. These measures will help law enforcement agencies to frustrate the activities of the most harmful criminal groups operating in the UK. They will target the facilitators who support and profit from serious and organised crime, and improve our ability to manage and disrupt the highest harm offenders.

Government response to the consultation “Review of the Computer Misuse Act 1990”

It is essential that the UK has the right legislative framework to allow us to tackle the harms posed to our citizens, businesses and Government services online. As part of this, the Home Office initiated a review of the Computer Misuse Act 1990 (CMA), and a subsequent call for information and a public consultation. The consultation ran from 7 February to 6 April 2023.

We have been considering the information provided to us by that consultation and are now publishing the results. In summary, these are:

There was broad support for a new power to allow law enforcement agencies to take down domains and IP addresses especially in the event of non-compliance with a voluntary arrangement. However, several respondents argued that voluntary agreements should be used initially or there would be a risk that court-based routes would take primacy and organisations would only respond to takedowns and seizures under the statutory arrangements. After further engagement, we believe the voluntary arrangements will continue to be the primary route for action.

There was support for a power to allow a law enforcement agency to require the preservation of computer data, although several organisations did raise concerns that data storage is costly and that any long-term data storage requirements would impact on an organisation's finances, reducing UK competitiveness.

There was less agreement on the proposal for a power to take action against a person possessing or using data obtained by another person through a CMA offence. This raised concerns with respondents. Some correspondents stated that harm would occur if an offence of copying data were to be created, as this would stop intelligence and law enforcement agencies from being able to proactively protect people from significant harm, and that there would be a lack of protection afforded to security researchers carrying out good faith security research.

The Criminal Justice Bill includes the necessary powers to enable law enforcement agencies to apply to the court for a domain name suspension order or an IP address suspension order.

When publishing the consultation, we also responded to three wider issues that arose in the call for information that ran previously in 2021. These related to the levels of sentencing, statutory defences to the CMA offences, and whether the UK has sufficient legislation to cover extraterritorial threats. We have been working with a range of partners on these since the consultation, including setting up a working group that includes law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, the cyber-security industry and system owners to consider in detail the issue of statutory defences. We will update Parliament on this wider work at the appropriate moment.

Government response to the consultation "Community Safety Partnerships review and anti-social behaviour powers"

The consultation on the community safety partnership review and antisocial behaviour powers ran from 27 March to 22 May 2023, in support of the Government's commitment to tackle crime and antisocial behaviour swiftly and robustly.

In March 2023, we launched a plan to crack down on antisocial behaviour, restoring people's confidence that unacceptable behaviour will be quickly and visibly punished.

We made a commitment to consult, via the community safety partnership review and antisocial behaviour powers consultation, on views about strengthening the powers used to tackle antisocial behaviour under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. The majority of respondents flagged that expanded powers would help to tackle antisocial behaviour more effectively, allowing the relevant agencies to better resource and implement longer term strategies, and agreed that the proposed measures will help to provide agencies with the necessary confidence to use these powers more frequently and consistently. This consultation was informed, and its findings are supported, by Home Office Analysis and Insight (HOAI) research into police perceptions of ASB powers.

The consultation also tested proposals to strengthen the accountability of community safety partnerships. Community safety partnerships were introduced by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and bring together local partners to formulate and deliver strategies to reduce crime, disorder and antisocial behaviour in their communities.

Part two of the police and crime commissioner review, conducted by the Home Office in 2021, found that while the importance of local partnerships such as community safety partnerships was widely acknowledged, they were not being used as effectively as they could be, resulting in a recommendation that the Home Office undertake a full review of community safety partnerships across England and Wales: the community safety partnership review. It also found that police and crime commissioners were unclear of their role in the antisocial behaviour case review process and that there was a disconnect between police and crime commissioners police and crime plans and local antisocial behaviour strategies developed by community safety partnerships.

I am very pleased, therefore, to unveil a package of measures through the Criminal Justice Bill to strengthen the powers available to the police and other local agencies to tackle antisocial behaviour. The measures will also help to improve and clarify the ways in which community safety partnerships and police and crime commissioners work together, including by enhancing strategic alignment between community safety partnerships and police and crime commissioners to deliver more effective outcomes for the public in tackling crime and antisocial behaviour.

A copy of each of the Government responses is available on gov.uk and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS32]

Petition

Tuesday 14 November 2023

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Dynamic pricing strategy

The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that there is frustration with the dynamic pricing strategy and secondary ticket selling within the UK market; acknowledges the unfairness of increasing prices to an unreasonable level and reselling of tickets at grossly inflated prices; notes the recent publicised problems with entry to events that these practices cause; and believe that urgent action should be taken to mitigate these issues.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to acknowledge these problems and reconsider introducing further regulation in this area, or support an inquiry into the practices of ticket sales and distribution companies operating in the UK.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Martyn Day*, *Official Report*, 12 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 878.]

[P002854]

Observations from the Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale):

We are committed to supporting fair and transparent ticket pricing and tackling unacceptable behaviour in this market.

We have strengthened the law in relation to ticketing information requirements and have introduced a criminal offence of using automated software to buy more tickets online than is allowed. We also support the work of enforcement agencies in this area, such as the Competition and Markets Authority, National Trading Standards, and the advertising industry's own regulator the Advertising Standards Authority. In addition, the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill will give enforcers new administrative and fining powers to protect consumers, including those buying tickets from the secondary market.

Ultimately, ticket pricing strategies are a matter for event organisers and ticketing platforms, providing they comply with relevant legislation. As consumer legislation including the Consumer Rights Act 2015 makes clear, event organisers and ticketing platforms are expected to be transparent with customers on how they price their tickets, the total charge and what terms and other measures apply to their use. This is to help consumers to make an informed decision. To gather further information on necessary protections, the Department for Business and Trade is currently undertaking a public consultation on key areas of consumer information transparency, “Smarter Regulation: Consultation on Improving Price Transparency and Product Information for Consumers”, which closed on 15 October.

ORAL ANSWERS

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PETITION

Tuesday 14 November 2023

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Tuesday 21 November 2023**

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