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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 21 November 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

COMMITTEE OF SELECTION

Ordered,

That Jo Churchill and Steve Double be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Joy Morrissey and Stuart Anderson be added.—(*Mr Marcus Jones.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Violence against Women and Girls: Legislation

1. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): Whether he plans to take legislative steps to help end violence against women and girls. [900196]

3. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Whether he plans to take legislative steps to help end violence against women and girls. [900198]

4. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Whether he plans to take legislative steps to help end violence against women and girls. [900200]

8. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Whether he plans to take legislative steps to help end violence against women and girls. [900205]

19. **Andrew Western** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What reforms he is making to the criminal justice system to tackle violence against women and girls. [900218]

Mr Speaker: Minister, welcome.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Laura Farris): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Since 2010, this Government have transformed the legislative landscape on tackling violence against women. We have created new criminal offences of stalking, non-fatal strangulation and coercive control, recognising that the most pernicious abuse is not always physical. We have implemented comprehensive modern slavery and domestic abuse laws, and outlawed insidious harms, such as revenge porn and the so-called “rough sex” defence to murder. We are prosecuting more rape cases today than in 2010, with sentences that are about 50% longer. But we are going further still, in our Sentencing Bill, our Criminal Justice Bill and our Victims and Prisoners Bill.

Owen Thompson: I welcome the Minister to her place. We need to be doing much more to tackle the culture of toxic masculinity that, sadly, still exists. We recently had a situation in Midlothian where one of our councillors faced sexual harassment at a public event. When they complained and raised the issue, the perpetrator’s colleagues simply said, “But he’s a good guy.” We need to do much more to tackle that sort of attitude. Despite the complaint being made and the complainant being believed, no action was ever taken. What more can this Government do to ensure that in these situations action is taken so that we protect women and girls from such unfortunate situations?

Laura Farris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he does a lot of work on perpetrator programmes through the White Ribbon scheme in Scotland. I am sorry to hear about the experience of one of his local councillors, and I draw to his attention the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023, which recently received Royal Assent. It creates an offence of intentional harassment carried out because of a person’s sex. It is quite possible that that covers his friend’s case, so I would be grateful if he wrote to me or came to see me to discuss it further.

Joanna Cherry: Last month, Sex Matters presented the Prime Minister with a letter signed by almost 15,000 people asking him to

“take urgent action to halt an escalating campaign of violence and intimidation against women in the name of ‘trans rights’.”

It details how women and, in particular, lesbians are being threatened with the loss of their livelihoods and with physical violence, shouted down and intimidated at public events, and sometimes even assaulted for insisting on their rights to freedom of belief and of expression, and for calling for sex-based protections to be upheld. Will the Minister condemn that violence and intimidation? Will she urge the Prime Minister to do so as well and to commit to addressing it by commissioning a rapid review of the impact of extreme trans rights activism on women’s rights, including the rights of lesbians? Will she also open a call for evidence?

Laura Farris: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question, and I certainly condemn the conduct that she has described. Even though holding a gender critical belief is protected in law, both under section 10 of the Equality Act 2010 and, more widely, under article 9 of the European convention on human rights, I am aware of the polarisation and, sometimes, intimidation that surrounds this debate. I have seen the letter that Sex Matters wrote to the Prime Minister, and the hon. and learned Lady should be in no doubt about how seriously this is viewed. I have made reference to the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023, which creates an offence of intentional harassment where there is any causal connection, even a weak one, to a person’s sex, under which such conduct may fall. She has asked for a rapid review, and I would like to meet her to discuss that further and any next steps.

Kirsten Oswald: A recent large-scale study by the Open University on societal attitudes and experiences of online violence against women and girls found that seven in 10 believe that the current legislation is not effective in tackling such violence. Almost three quarters

of women in Scotland, and more than half of men there, want online violence to be made a crime—that is a higher level than was found among those surveyed in England. Platforms have a duty of care to their users, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that new guidance in the Online Safety Act 2023 is effectively enforced and encourages women and girls to come forward with cases of online abuse?

Laura Farris: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. There is no doubt that some of the toxic content, including violent pornography, has a serious impact on the way that women and girls are treated and the attitudes that certain men have towards them. As she will know, the Online Safety Act 2023 only received Royal Assent a month ago, and there is an extended implementation period. She will also know, I hope, that one of the later amendments to the Bill accepted by the Government placed a statutory obligation on Ofcom to publish guidance which summarises the measures that all online services need to take to reduce the risk of violence to women and girls. That is not on its own, but in consultation with the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the Victims Commissioner and other experts. The Act also places an obligation on social media and pornography providers to prevent children from being exposed to harmful content through new and robust age verification exercises—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Laura Farris: Sorry; I will come back to the hon. Lady on that.

Marion Fellows: I welcome the Minister to her place. Her former colleague, the Home Secretary, thought homelessness was a lifestyle choice, yet in reality, almost a quarter of homelessness among women and children is due to a violent or abusive relationship. The Scottish Government are piloting £1,000 grants to assist women who have left violent relationships, to help pay for essentials including rent and clothing. Has she considered that approach, instead of taking tents off the homeless?

Laura Farris: We placed the safety of domestic abuse victims at the heart of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Local authorities have been given £25 million to ensure that all domestic abuse victims receive priority for housing. In addition, the Act places a legal duty on tier 1 local authorities to provide a wide range of support, including refuges. To date, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has allocated £377 million for local authorities to comply with the duty to provide housing.

Andrew Western: It is vital that victims of serious sexual assault are supported through what can often be a lengthy and traumatic process, yet we know that many rape victims do not access early mental health support because their therapy notes can be requested as part of the criminal investigation. That happens far too often and treats the wrong person with suspicion. Does the Minister agree that a specialist legal advocate for victims could allow them to challenge invasive requests for private information and access the support they need at the time they need it most?

Laura Farris: This is an issue that the Law Commission is looking into, and it already appears in our Victims and Prisoners Bill, so that such requests will never be

more than necessary and proportionate. On the subject of whether there should be a dedicated legal adviser, I respectfully draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that since 2010, there are now 950 dedicated independent sexual violence advisers, who can support victims of rape and serious sexual abuse every step of the way. We have quadrupled victims funding to ensure that we continue to grow that cohort.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I warmly welcome my hon. Friend to her place on the Treasury Bench; it is much deserved, and she was a distinguished member of the Justice Committee. She will know from that time that much work has already been done, following on from Operation Soteria, to improve investigation, conviction and prosecution rates and the victim experience in relation to rape and serious sexual offences. Will she also bear in mind that there are further opportunities, which we highlighted as a Committee in our scrutiny of the victims element of the Victims and Prisoners Bill, to improve the victim experience and ensure that it is consistent across the whole country?

Laura Farris: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and applaud all the work he does as Chair of the Justice Committee. It is undoubtedly true that the Victims and Prisoners Bill plays an important role in putting the victims code on to a statutory footing and giving victims enhanced rights, including a right of review and a right to make an impact statement, which we have supported. I also draw his attention to not just Operation Soteria but the fact that we are training 2,000 specialist police officers in rape and serious sexual offences, as well as the national roll-out of section 28 evidence procedures, which enable victims of these hideous crimes to give evidence early, privately and behind closed doors, to completely change their experience of the criminal justice system and keep them engaged in the process.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I welcome the Minister to her well-deserved appointment. She will be aware of the case of David Fuller, who, as well as murdering two women, abused the corpses of over 100 women and girls in the mortuaries of the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust. For these crimes, he will rightly die in prison. However, the current legislation is shockingly inadequate on the abuse of dead bodies. It covers only penetrative sexual assault and not other acts of sexual assault on dead bodies. Will the Minister meet me, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and other colleagues to discuss how we can rectify that in the Criminal Justice Bill, which comes before the House next week?

Laura Farris: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. The David Fuller case is appalling, and I send my deepest sympathies to the families of his victims. It is unbelievably dispiriting that we are even having to talk about these acts, and of extending the definition of abuse to meet the width and depravity of his crimes.

As my right hon. Friend will know, the offence he is referring to is dealt with in section 70 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. As a result of the David Fuller case, the Ministry of Justice is now reviewing both the maximum penalty and the scope of the law to ensure that what my

right hon. Friend describes is adequately captured. Of course, I will have a meeting with both him and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I join others in welcoming the Minister to her place. A victims Bill has been promised by the Conservatives since 2016, but while the UK Government have dithered, the Scottish Government have introduced the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill, which seeks to put victims and witnesses at the heart of the justice system. It ensures that a range of trauma-informed support is available to child victims of violent and sexual abuse crimes, allowing them to give pre-recorded evidence without needing to go to a police station or a court. Have the Minister and the Government considered adopting that approach?

Laura Farris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he will know, our Victims and Prisoners Bill is making its way through Parliament as we speak. He has talked about victim-focused support; I draw his attention to things like Operation Soteria, which is directed at rape victims and has now been rolled out on a national basis. That places victims' rights at the heart of the inquiry and focuses all the effort on the suspects and their behaviour, so to be honest, what he has described is consistent with our current models of policing and investigating crime. I hope the Victims and Prisoners Bill will conclude its passage through Parliament and receive Royal Assent soon.

ICC: Government Support

2. **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What additional (a) financial and (b) practical support the Government plans to provide the International Criminal Court for its war crime investigations. [900197]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): The UK is one of the major funders of the International Criminal Court, and provides further practical support including sentence enforcement, pro bono expertise in victim and witness protection, and secondments. In June, I met with the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan KC, and I will remain in contact with the ICC to discuss what resources it needs to operate effectively.

Neale Hanvey: It should go without saying that the International Criminal Court needs to be able to do its work unimpeded if it is to establish when collateral damage transcends into deliberate slaughter, or whether self-defence was in fact collective punishment. Will the Government provide a guarantee from the Dispatch Box that they will not intervene—as they did alongside the United States in 2021—against any future ICC investigation into war crimes perpetrated against the people of Gaza?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman's original question was about the resource that we provide to the ICC. We are the second largest donor after Germany, and we have provided some additional support this year. Questions about prosecution are matters for independent prosecutors. It is not for Ministers in this Parliament to make that

sort of decision: that will be a matter for independent prosecutors, whom I would expect to exercise their discretion freely and fairly.

Legal Aid: Immigration Cases

5. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of legal aid for immigration cases. [900201]

16. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of legal aid for immigration cases. [900213]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): Legal aid is available for asylum cases, for victims of domestic abuse and modern slavery, for separated migrant children, and for immigration cases where someone is challenging a detention decision. Through the Illegal Migration Act 2023, individuals who receive a removal notice under the Act will have access to free legal advice in relation to that notice.

David Linden: The Law Society has warned that a proposed 15% increase in legal aid rates will not be enough to ensure that sufficient immigration lawyers are available to deal with deportations to Rwanda. Charities supporting refugees make 16 attempts on average before securing a lawyer, while in London, charities are only successfully finding legal representation for 4.1% of referrals. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the legal aid sector does not collapse in England and Wales due to the poor decisions made by his colleagues?

Mike Freer: The 15% was agreed after a six-week consultation looking at other increases for other specialist work. The Legal Aid Agency will always keep provision under review to ensure that cover is provided for those who need it.

Richard Thomson: There are approximately 175,000 people trapped in the current asylum backlog, many of them living in hotels with no right to support themselves or their families through work. Instead of unlawful and pointless dog-whistling gestures such as the Government's Rwanda policy, would it not be better to allow people the opportunity to work and support themselves, and to allow the Home Office and the legal aid system to be resourced adequately so that we can deal with our international obligations exactly as we ought to?

Mike Freer: The question about the Home Office is one the hon. Member may want to raise with Home Office Ministers themselves. On access to legal aid, I would not say that £2 billion of legal aid means this is under-resourced. This year alone, we have continued to increase levels of legal aid across the board, and specifically in specialist areas such as immigration, so I reject the notion that it is underfunded.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Lord Chancellor is currently facing a judicial review over the failure to ensure that immigration legal aid is available to those who need it. For example, the south-west

has capacity for fewer than 300 people per year, yet the Bibby Stockholm has capacity for almost 500. Is this not an abject failure of the legal aid system? It is operating exactly how the Government have designed it to: abandoning the most vulnerable to navigate a complex and hostile environment without any recourse to legal representation. Is this moral bankruptcy or incompetence, or is it a combination of both?

Mike Freer: I do not accept that characterisation at all. In fact, this Government are putting legal aid in place to support those affected by the Illegal Migration Act and especially the uplift in fees to ensure that qualified legal advice is available to people, whether physically or through telephone advice. Access to justice, and access to legal aid, is there.

Ex-offenders: Employment

6. **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What progress he has made on improving employment opportunities for ex-offenders. [900202]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): I am pleased to say that the proportion of prison leavers in employment six months after their release has more than doubled in the two years to March 2023. We have delivered significant reforms in this area, among which are prison employment leads to match prisoners to jobs on release, and business-led employment advisory boards that partner prisoners with industry to benefit from their expertise. While this is very significant progress, there is always more to do, and we are determined to continue to see that figure climb higher.

Andrew Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. We know that ex-offenders are at high risk of homelessness, particularly immediately on release. We also know that being in work significantly reduces that risk, so the link between the probation service and Jobcentre Plus in supporting ex-offenders into work is of critical importance. Will the Minister do everything possible across Government to ensure that ex-offenders leave custody with the best possible chance of getting a job?

Edward Argar: May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor as prisons and probation Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), for his work in this space?

My hon. Friend, as always, is absolutely spot-on that securing employment and preventing homelessness are essential to tackling reoffending. Those in work are nearly 10% less likely to reoffend. We work closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that prison leavers have effective support to prepare for employment on release. For example, prisoners can meet a DWP prison work coach from 12 weeks before release to provide advice on benefits and employment, including day one access to DWP employment programmes, and we continue to foster those strong links.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. Veterans very often fall on hard times, find themselves in prison and then become ex-offenders. Has the Minister had any opportunity to work alongside

the Minister for Veterans' Affairs to ensure that priority can be given to help veterans get over the bad times and to re-engage in society again? They have offered so much during their time in the services, and they can do so again if given the opportunity.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is absolutely right to highlight just how much veterans, even when they have got themselves into bother, can offer the community through rehabilitation and through work. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to engage with my right hon. Friend the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, I intend to do so. A whole range of opportunities can work for veterans. Just this weekend, I saw the ex-jockey Ryan Hatch on ITV Racing talking about his work highlighting equine job opportunities—which are often appropriate for veterans—in prisons. I look forward to working with my right hon. Friend—and, indeed, with the hon. Gentleman, if he wishes—on this issue.

Prison Capacity

7. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Ind): What steps he is taking to increase the number of prison places. [900203]

9. **Gary Sambrook** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase prison capacity. [900206]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): This Government have embarked on the biggest prison building programme since the Victorian era, to create 20,000 modern, secure, rehabilitative places. To date, we have already delivered 5,600 places, a third prison at HMP Millsike is under construction, and last week we secured outline planning permission for our fourth prison, near the existing HMP Gartree in Leicestershire.

Scott Benton: I welcome the delivery of 20,000 additional prison places, as well as plans to deport some foreign criminals, rather than jailing them here in the UK. That will free up spaces and deliver considerable savings to the taxpayer. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to work with the Home Office to mitigate the risk of legal challenges as we seek to deport some of those who may pose a risk to the public?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Between January 2019 and March 2023, 14,700 foreign national offenders were served with deportation orders and removed. As he has indicated, we have expanded the early removal scheme to allow for the removal of FNOs up to 18 months before the end of the custodial element of their sentence, so that we can bring forward the deportation of criminals who should not be here. On his specific point, we work closely with the Home Office to ensure that the right people and processes are in place to resist legal challenges.

Gary Sambrook: I welcome the measures that my right hon. and learned Friend has outlined to increase prison capacity to its largest ever, but he will recognise that capacity in prisons needs to come with capacity in staffing in order to make it a reality. Will he update the House on the progress made so far, particularly in the midlands and Birmingham?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is such a champion on this issue. He is right, and to increase the number of staff we have increased pay, accepting the recommendation of the independent pay review body in full. That means an increase of 7% for band 3 to band 5 officers, which is wing officers up to custodial managers. We are also backing our officers with the roll-out of body-worn videos for every officer on shift, as well as PAVA spray in the adult estate. The net result is that the resignation rate is down significantly. That means more people remaining on the wings, improving the quantity and quality of our prison places overall.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): May I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), to her well-deserved place on the Treasury Bench? As well as expanding prison capacity, has the Secretary of State looked at the possibility of investing in women's centres? That was part of the Government's female offender strategy, but it also has a proven track record in cutting reoffending?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my hon. Friend. Yes, absolutely; where the court determines that an alternative disposal is appropriate, we are keen for non-custodial options to be available. That is why we are investing heavily in alternatives. There are cases where women offenders must go to jail, but where that is not necessary we want to ensure that alternatives remain so that rehabilitation can take place in the community.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): Now that the Government have left themselves with no choice but to send fewer people to prison and let more out early because there is simply no space for them, how many convicted criminals are currently on bail awaiting sentence, compared with this time last year? When do the Government expect normal service to resume?

Alex Chalk: I am proud of the fact that, unlike the previous Government, we are rolling out a prison expansion programme—something that entirely defeated the Labour party when it was in office. Labour said it was going to roll out three Titan prisons. How many did it produce? Absolutely none. On bail, it is the case that the number of those awaiting trial is higher, and up by 6,000 compared with the pre-covid period. That is why this Government are expanding capacity on the estate. We have 1,000 more judges, we are increasing the amount of legal aid, and we are ensuring that when people come to be sentenced, unlike under the Labour Government, they are going to prison for longer.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Secretary of State's emergency early release scheme is meant to tackle a capacity crisis that is entirely of this Government's making, and it excludes only serious violence. Surely domestic abuse and stalking are serious offences, yet they are not excluded from early release. What kind of signal does that give to victims, the public, and indeed perpetrators of violence against women and girls?

Alex Chalk: We are proud that under this Government sentences for offences such as rape have gone up by a third. We have a situation in which charges are up, the conviction rate is higher and sentences are longer—and,

unlike under the Labour Government, people are spending a higher proportion of those sentences in custody. We think that is the right thing to do. To the hon. Member's point, the exclusions in place go beyond what he indicated, so he is factually incorrect; they also include sex offences and terrorist offences. Here is a really important point: where the custodial authorities are satisfied that there is a specific risk, there is an opportunity to ensure that release is blocked. That is important, because we will always stand up for victims of crime.

Kevin Brennan: Argument weak? Go long and do not answer the question—the classic response from this Government. The truth is that without any Government announcement of a start date, prisons began releasing offenders over a month ago. These men are already walking our streets, but the Government will not tell us how many, or why they were behind bars in the first place. Why do the Government not believe that the public deserve to know who is being released back into the community when a court decided that they should be in prison?

Alex Chalk: We will make whatever appropriate announcements in due course; we will not demur from that. We will also not apologise for having, under this Government, a higher custodial population than before. We are taking robust steps to ensure that the public are protected, which means unashamedly that those who commit the most serious offences—those such as murder in the context of sexual or sadistic conduct—go to prison for the rest of their lives. Will the hon. Member support that? I wonder. We are also using the evidence so that those capable of rehabilitation are rehabilitated. One thing that we will not ever put at risk is the threat to women and girls. As the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Laura Farris), indicated, we have taken steps to ensure that victims of domestic abuse will be properly protected under the Government.

Mr Speaker: Here is a man who will go short: I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

Non-custodial Sentences: Public Confidence

10. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Whether he is taking steps to increase levels of public confidence in non-custodial sentences. [900207]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (**Alex Chalk**): To earn public confidence, non-custodial sentences must self-evidently be punitive, so that the British people can see that offenders are being punished for their crimes. They must also be enforceable, so that judges and magistrates can be confident that those who step out of line risk being brought back before the court and sentenced to immediate custody. That is why we are doubling the number of the latest GPS tags available to the court, so that offenders can be strictly monitored, and we have increased funding for the probation service by £155 million a year.

Sir Desmond Swayne: It is essential that every advantage be had from the latest monitoring technology, isn't it?

Alex Chalk: Pithy and perfect—my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Under the old technology, all that the so-called radio frequency tags could tell the probation

service was whether that individual had left the premises to which he had been bailed or curfewed. The modern GPS tags are far more effective, because they can indicate where that person has gone, keeping them under a tight rein. We have additional tags, including alcohol monitoring tags to allow the courts and probation services also to monitor alcohol where that is the root cause of the offending.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Is the evidence not clear that short prison sentences do not work, and that women's centres, which deal with drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and so on, can be effective? It would make a lot of sense to roll that out for the male population—it is cheaper and it is better.

Alex Chalk: I am delighted to hear that from the hon. Gentleman. We have to follow the evidence, which shows that short sentences of immediate custody lead to a higher reoffending rate than those where the sentence is suspended, albeit on tight conditions, which might include curfew, an unpaid work order and potentially a rehabilitation requirement. Why? Because if the offender fails to comply, the probation service can find them in breach and bring them back before the court, where they will then likely hear the clang of the prison gate. We will follow the evidence. We make no apology for using our custodial estate to lock up the most dangerous offenders for longer and take them out of circulation. But protecting the public also means ensuring that those who would otherwise reoffend get off the conveyor belt of crime.

Prison Estate Conditions

11. **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the conditions in the prison estate for the rehabilitation of offenders. [900208]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): By the end of the spending review period, we will have invested nearly £4 billion to deliver an additional 20,000 modern prison places and ensure that the right conditions are in place to rehabilitate prisoners, cut crime and protect the public. The key to effective rehabilitation is the provision of education and skills training, to increase a prisoner's employability and ensure that they can access employment upon release, alongside providing support for substance misuse, treatment and so on. We are also investing to improve rehabilitative spaces in prison, having delivered our employment hubs, where prisoners can access job vacancies. We will renovate prison workshops through our HMP academies programme.

Rachael Maskell: No glass, just bars at the window; mice and rats; faeces in the gravy; and sewage overflows regularly in his cell. This is not the start of a Victorian novel, but the disgrace experienced by my young constituent, who was locked in his shared cell for 23 and a half hours a day, having never received the vital specialist mental health support that he needed. When can we expect such draconian conditions at HMP Hull to end? What appropriate steps will the Minister take to ensure that people in prison experience rehabilitation, not the conditions that my constituent faced?

Edward Argar: If the hon. Lady would like to write to me, I will be happy to look into that specific case. But in broad terms, in the last financial year this Government invested £217 million in capital and maintenance spending, up from £149 million in 2010-2011. That includes, since 2020, delivering £73 million of capital maintenance projects across Yorkshire. Security is not a dirty word in this context but is vital to creating conditions in which people can be safe and rehabilitated. We continue to work closely with the NHS on improving things such as mental health support for those in prison, but I am happy to engage with her on this issue.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

12. **Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con):** If the Government will make an assessment of the potential merits of extending the unduly lenient sentence scheme to include additional offences. [900209]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Gareth Bacon): In 2019 we expanded the unduly lenient sentence scheme to include 14 new offences, including further child sexual offences and coercive or controlling behaviour. We have no immediate plans to extend the scheme further, but we keep it under constant review.

Gareth Johnson: I welcome the new Minister to his place; his is an excellent appointment and I wish him every success. The fact that malicious wounding, actual bodily harm, burglary and even rape, when dealt with in the youth courts, do not come under the unduly lenient sentence scheme is plain wrong. Will he please review that situation, which time and again lets down the victims of those serious crimes?

Gareth Bacon: The unduly lenient sentence scheme is intended for use in serious cases for offenders sentenced in the Crown court. The Attorney General has the power to refer a sentence to the Court of Appeal for review if they believe it is unduly lenient. A youth court can sentence a child to up to two years of detention only. Where a child's offence is likely to attract a sentence of more than two years, the case must be passed to the Crown court for sentencing, where the scheme therefore applies.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Stiffening unduly lenient Crown court sentences is all very well, but there will still be delays in the system if there are backlogs in prosecuting in the courts. Up to 25% of criminal barristers have left the profession over the past five years, so what action are the Government taking to address the exodus of criminal barristers?

Gareth Bacon: In recent years the Government have invested an extra £141 million in criminal legal aid, which should expedite a solution to the situation.

Death by Dangerous Driving: Sentencing

13. **James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con):** If he will make an assessment of the impact of changes in sentencing guidelines on causing death by dangerous driving on the length of sentences. [900210]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Gareth Bacon): The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 increased the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving from 14 years to life imprisonment. In June 2023, the independent Sentencing Council published revised sentencing guidelines for motoring offences, including for causing death by dangerous driving. It is too early to assess the outcome of those changes, but we regularly publish sentencing statistics on gov.uk. The Sentencing Council also monitors all guidelines in accordance with its statutory duty.

James Wild: I welcome my hon. Friend to his position. It is over a year since Parliament legislated to increase the maximum sentence for death by dangerous driving to life imprisonment. However, three members of my constituent Summer Mace's family were killed in a horrific incident, and in June the offender got only 10 and a half years. That is totally inadequate. As RoadPeace has shown, far too many sentences are too short. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss those sentencing guidelines, so that we can ensure that they reflect what Parliament actually legislated for?

Gareth Bacon: I was very sorry to hear of the death of Paul Carter, Lisa Carter and Jade Mace in January 2023 in a collision caused by Aurelijus Cielevicius, and the devastating consequences for their family and friends. I know that my hon. Friend has campaigned hard on this issue, and I read his Adjournment debate earlier this month. Sentencing is entirely a matter for our independent courts, based on the facts of each case. In July 2023, after Cielevicius was sentenced, the revised Sentencing Council guidelines for causing death by dangerous driving came into force, following the increase of the maximum penalty introduced by the PCSC Act 2022. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further, should that be helpful.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The man who was convicted of causing death by careless driving when he killed my young constituent Gregg was sentenced to only nine months in prison. However, because he was charged with causing death by careless driving, not dangerous driving, Gregg's family had no right to appeal under the Attorney General's unduly lenient sentence scheme. Will the Minister agree to discuss this with the Attorney General and look into revising the scheme to include causing death by careless driving?

Gareth Bacon: I was very sorry to hear the details of that particular case. I will, of course, be very happy to raise it with the Attorney General.

Children in Custody: Education

14. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve the provision of education for children in custody. [900211]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): We work closely with education providers to drive up standards of teaching and improve academic outcomes. The curriculum offered to children in custody is needs-led and determined by individual aspirations, literacy and numeracy levels, interests and sentence

length. Where education provision is inadequate, we will hold providers to account to ensure that children receive the education they need to turn away from crime.

Munira Wilson: Earlier this year, I visited Feltham young offenders institution and witnessed at first hand the very challenging conditions in which dedicated professionals work with young people who have committed the most serious crimes and had a very difficult start in life. Back in 2016, the Charlie Taylor review recommended that we move away from young offenders institutions to secure schools. The Government fully accepted his vision, yet seven years on not a single secure school has opened. One has been built, but it has not admitted any pupils. If the Government are serious about rehabilitating young offenders and cutting reoffending, when will they finally roll out secure schools for those pupils?

Edward Argar: In a previous life as a Minister, as it were, I had youth justice in my portfolio back in 2018-19, and I had the opportunity to visit Feltham at that time. I worked with Charlie Taylor on delivering those recommendations into practice. I am pleased to tell the hon. Lady that we anticipate the first secure school opening in 2024.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new shadow Minister.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Education is vital to reduce violence, especially on the youth estate. However, violence on the youth estate is skyrocketing. Since last year, assaults on staff have increased by 33%. That puts prison staff at risk in their workplace and increases the trauma experienced by children and young people. It can also prolong their rehabilitation. How will the Minister use education and other methods available to him to reduce that violence?

Edward Argar: It is nice to be taking questions from the hon. Lady in her new role as shadow Minister, rather than when she used to question me in the Justice Committee. She is absolutely right to highlight the challenges of violence across the youth estate, which have been too high for too long, and we continue to work hard across all sites to address it. Among the measures put in place, we are ensuring that each child receives a full needs assessment, covering education, psychology, resettlement, health and behavioural support. Education and skills play a vital part in helping children and young people to get their lives back on course, but that must be in the context of a secure environment, because security has to be the premise on which all those other benefits can be delivered.

Short Sentence Suspension: Probation Service

15. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the suspension of short sentences on the probation service. [900212]

17. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the suspension of short sentences on the probation service. [900214]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Chalk): To expand probation capacity, we have increased funding by £155 million a year to deliver effective supervision of offenders in the community. In

2020-21 we recruited an additional 1,000 trainee officers, 1,500 more in the following year, and 1,500 more in the year after that. This means that offenders who pose the highest risk to communities will receive robust supervision.

Daniel Zeichner: Successive Conservative Ministers have allowed the criminal justice system to fall into its current parlous state, making many communities, including in Cambridge, less safe. Now they propose to shift the burden from an over-pressed prison service to an over-pressed probation service. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the money that should have been available to prisons will be moved to the probation service to allow it to keep our communities safe?

Alex Chalk: The first point is not right; since 2010, the overall levels of crime have fallen by 40%. As for the second point, reoffending has dropped from about 32% to about 25%. The third point, on probation, is, with respect, a better one. As we move towards suspended sentence orders, it is right for them to be robust and enforceable so that if people step out of line they can expect to hear the clang of the prison gate, and that is why I am engaging with the leadership of the probation service. Yesterday I also met frontline probation officers, because I want to hear from them how we can ensure that their workload is manageable and they have the resources that they need to keep our communities safe.

Chris Elmore: I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I echo the concerns of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the British Independent Retailers Association, which fear that the scrapping of short sentences will only embolden retail criminals. The Secretary of State will know that far too many shop workers face being attacked in shops across the UK, particularly as we approach the festive period. According to the police, there has been a 24% increase in shoplifting in the past year. Can the Secretary of State assure us that the probation service can cope with the expected surge in retail crime, and ensure that those who work in shops will be protected and anyone who attacks them will face the full force of the law?

Alex Chalk: Those who behave in such an appalling way should expect to feel exactly that: the full force of the law. Let me be crystal clear: those who pose a particular threat to individuals can expect to hear the clang of the prison gate. Those who commit offences while subject to an order—be it, for instance, a community order, a stalking prevention order or a domestic abuse protection order—can also expect to be outwith the presumption. Through the use of tags, we can ensure that people who do not abide by stringent requirements—which, by the way, could include not going to a particular shopping precinct—can expect one outcome, and one outcome only: prison.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), the Secretary of State said that he had recruited 1,000 additional probation officers, but in fact that recruitment campaign has resulted in 76 fewer probation officers between

March last year and March this year. Owing to the excessive workload, staff are leaving in droves. The proposed new presumption in favour of extended sentences and the extension of electronic monitoring will simply offload more pressure from prisons on to the probation service, will it not? What are the Government doing to address these issues of excessive workload and the loss of probation staff?

Alex Chalk: On a point of detail, as of 30 September 2023 the increase on the previous year was 4.2% for band 3 probation officers, 6.9% for band 4 officers and 13% for senior probation officers. The so-called attrition rate, or resignation rate, is also down. There are more probation officers, and more of them are remaining in place. The reason that matters is the fact that experience counts. This is an extremely difficult job, and making good judgments requires wisdom and experience. We are investing in the probation service so that its officers can do their job on behalf of our communities.

Topical Questions

T1. [900221] **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (**Alex Chalk**): Since the last Justice questions, we have introduced a Criminal Justice Bill, which responds rapidly and robustly to the latest criminal threats. It will include strengthened laws to criminalise those who breach trust by taking intimate images without consent; broaden the offence of encouraging and assisting self-harm; give judges the power to order offenders to attend sentencing hearings; and enable the probation service to polygraph-test more terrorists and sex offenders. Meanwhile, the new Sentencing Bill has public protection at its core, making the severest punishments available for the most dangerous offenders, such as murderers who kill with sexual or sadistic conduct, to take them out of circulation forever. It will protect the public by breaking the cycle of reoffending to reduce crime.

We have also welcomed my hon. Friends the Members for Newbury (Laura Farris) and for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) to the Front Bench. As I think the House has already observed, they will make a formidable contribution to public life.

Munira Wilson: The Prime Minister and certain other senior Government figures have suggested that the European convention on human rights should be disapplied in some asylum cases, and the deputy chairman of the Conservative party, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), has said that the Government should simply ignore last week's Supreme Court ruling. Does the Justice Secretary agree?

Alex Chalk: The Government are confident that we can deliver on the priorities of the British people while remaining within the four corners of our international legal obligations. Make no mistake, we are determined to ensure that our borders are secure. This is a rule of law issue. It should not be the case that those who try to jump the queue and arrive illegally should derive some sort of advantage from that. We understand that clearly on the Government Benches and we will do everything we can to stop the boats.

T3. [900223] **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): One of the primary reasons for adjournment and relisting in magistrates courts is a lack of trained probation officers to carry out pre-sentence stand-down reports. Could the Minister outline what steps he is taking to address this so that courts can get through caseloads more speedily?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority as a magistrate, and I know from my own experience as a practitioner how important stand-down reports are. They provide the bench with information about the offender—their relationship situation, their record of previous convictions, their mental health problems and so on—so that the court can tailor a disposal that punishes the offender but also progresses their rehabilitation. We are working closely with the probation service to ensure that that resource is properly allocated so that we can have more stand-down reports to ensure better justice on the facts of each case.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Alex Cunningham.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Contrary to the claims of Ministers at every Question Time that they are getting the courts backlog sorted out, they are not, and the pain just drags on for victims. The Crown court backlog reached a record 65,000 cases at the end of June. Nearly 5,000 of them have been waiting for two years and 36,000 cases have defendants on bail. Why are things still getting worse?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): I have to say, Mr Speaker, that God loves a trier. Yes, the backlog has gone up. The hon. Gentleman will know that post covid and post the Criminal Bar Association strike, the backlog did increase. On top of that, this Government have cracked down on crime with more police officers, and that has meant more people being charged and appearing in court. We are addressing this with unlimited sitting days. We recruited 1,000 judges across all jurisdictions last year and we are doing the same this year. We have invested in the court estate to improve resilience, and we have extended 24 Nightingale courts to ensure that we have capacity.

Alex Cunningham: Come on now—we know that the statistics tell a very different story. The Crown courts remain in crisis, and what about the civil courts? The quarterly civil justice statistics from April to June 2023 show that the average time taken for small claims and multi-fast-tracked claims to go to trial was 52 weeks and 78 weeks respectively. Is it the same excuse for the crisis in the civil courts?

Mike Freer: Since the Government have increased the amount of money spent on the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, we have recruited judges across the jurisdiction to help in the civil courts, increased the number of days that fee-paid judges can do from 30 days to 80 days a year, introduced regional virtual pilots to support London and the south-east, and invested in mediation. All of this is ensuring that people have access to justice in a court system that is dealing with higher numbers of cases than ever before.

T5. [900225] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): The Minister will be aware that approximately £1 million of taxpayers' money was spent, including through legal aid, on finally deporting the vile sex offender Yaqub Ahmed, whose crimes were just unimaginable. Will the Secretary of State and the Minister ensure that legal aid processes are reviewed and, importantly, dust off the previous plans to introduce wasted cost orders in immigration cases so that lawyers who pursue these spurious cases are prevented from doing so?

Mike Freer: As my right hon. Friend will appreciate, I cannot comment on individual cases, but I can reassure her that the payment of wasted or unreasonable costs can already be ordered by the tribunal if it considers it appropriate. Given the issue that she has raised, however, I would be more than happy to meet her to ensure that her concerns are conveyed firmly to those responsible for the reviews.

T2. [900222] **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): Eight courts have so far been named as containing reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—and three of them are closed. The Government will not say which prisons are affected, but will they guarantee that funding for RAAC removal will not come at the expense of existing maintenance schemes, given the huge backlog of repairs in courts and prisons?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman is right about the eight court buildings, but that is in the context of an estate of over 300 buildings. It is important to note, however, that we have massively increased the budget for the court estate, and that enables us to do two things. First, we can take on more projects and also plan them because we have guaranteed this over two years, meaning that we can plan in a more efficient and effective way. The second issue so far as prisons are concerned is that separate considerations apply because the buildings are used for a whole range of different purposes; there is the prison itself, but there are plenty of ancillary buildings. This is all being inspected in the normal way, and the budget is certainly there to effect remediations if required.

T10. [900230] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton South) (Con): Last week I visited my local Co-op store in Hartburn, where I met staff and Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers reps as part of Respect for Shopworkers Week. There are around 867 assaults on shop workers not each month, not each week but every single day. We cannot go on like this. Will my right hon. and learned Friend look again at what we can do to tackle this issue and deliver justice for shop workers?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those people are on the frontline of society, acting effectively in public to do an incredibly important public service. We have already moved to ensure that the courts can treat assaults on shop workers as an aggravating factor when it comes to sentencing. To be clear, this means that, in appropriate cases, the fact that a person has assaulted a retail worker can mean the difference between a non-custodial penalty and a custodial penalty, which is absolutely right. Those who behave in such a cowardly way should expect all consequences.

T4. [900224] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The rule of law is sacrosanct, isn't it?

Alex Chalk: Yes.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the judiciary must not make incendiary comments about Israel? At Walsall magistrates court, a district judge recently acquitted defendants who had vandalised a factory, believing it to be supplying Israel, and is reported to have told them their action was

“proportionate in comparison to the crimes against humanity which they were acting to stop.”

Does he agree that judges are supposed to uphold the law, not encourage its breach? This brings our legal system into ill-repute, so will he take this from me as a complaint to the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office?

Mr Speaker: Order. We are not meant to criticise the courts, and I know that such a learned Gentleman will know better; I am sure we can avoid any criticism.

Alex Chalk: I simply note the question. Plainly, I make no comment on the specifics. I have heard my right hon. and learned Friend’s point, and I will happily take it up with him subsequently.

T6. [900226] **Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Ministry of Justice has released its latest quarterly statistics on deaths and self-harm in the England and Wales prison estate. The rate of self-harm incidents among female prisoners went up by a stark 63% compared with the same quarter last year, and there was an overall 24% increase in self-inflicted deaths. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of the MOJ’s policies on these increases across the prison estate?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Edward Argar): The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this, as every death in custody is a tragedy. We continue to do all we can to improve the safety of prisoners, both in that respect and in respect of reducing instances of self-harm. We are continuing to deliver on our safety commitment outlined in the prisons strategy White Paper, including by introducing more ligature-resistant cells, funding a study to understand the extent of deaths, and rolling out an emotional resilience and peer-support programme in six prisons. Of course, our staff are vital to this, and I take the opportunity to pay tribute to them; we are investing to support them to continue to do that work.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): In the summer, the Government made a welcome announcement on banning zombie knives and machetes and doubling the sentences for supplying a knife to an under-18 and for possessing a knife with intent to cause harm. Now we are in a new Session, will the Secretary of State set out the timeline for bringing forward legislation to make this happen?

Alex Chalk: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who is a passionate and principled campaigner on the issue of public safety. These measures will find their way into the Criminal Justice Bill. I look forward to her support, which I know will be forthcoming. Let us hope that hon. Members right across the House will put public protection as one of their priorities.

T7. [900227] **Jim McMahon** (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): New figures released by the Co-op Group show that a staggering 300,000 incidents of shoplifting, abuse, violence and antisocial behaviour in Co-op stores have been reported this year alone. Surely the best way to stop violence against shop workers is to make it a stand-alone offence, as requested by the Labour party, the Co-op party and the USDAW trade union.

Alex Chalk: It is important to establish what is already available to the police: section 39 on common assault, section 47 on assault occasioning actual bodily harm and—heaven forbid—sections 20 and 18, which relate to more serious cases of grievous bodily harm. Plus, if an individual is convicted on any of those grounds, the courts can—indeed, ought to—consider assault on a retail worker as an aggravating factor. As I have indicated, that can mean the difference between a non-custodial and a custodial penalty.

We will keep these matters under review, but the central point is that before someone can go before the court, they have to be arrested. That is why I am delighted that we have more police officers than at any time in our history, ready to take the fight to those who assault shop workers.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend has a terrific record on dealing with SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—so he will understand how greedy lawyers encourage their billionaire clients to crush their opponents by extending court cases, dragging them out and multiplying them. What has not been taken on board is that that also costs the taxpayer millions of pounds. I think those lawyers should have to meet those costs. With that in mind, will he publish the costs incurred by SLAPPs cases?

Alex Chalk: No one in this House has done more than my right hon. Friend to clamp down on this iniquitous behaviour, and I am pleased that we have been able to make some progress. He makes a really important point: every day that is spent in court pursuing ill-founded and abusive litigation is time that could be spent on other matters in the public interest. I will certainly look into the interesting suggestion he makes about publishing the cost of that behaviour.

T8. [900228] **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): After the Supreme Court ruling on Rwanda, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) said that the Government should “ignore the laws” and put planes in the air anyway. The Prime Minister has failed to distance himself from those comments. Does that disappoint the Justice Secretary?

Alex Chalk: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a few moments ago. There is understandable righteous indignation about the situation that exists. We believe that we can comply and deliver our policies within the four corners of international law—that is our approach. However, those who arrive illegally threaten to corrode the rule of law, because that of itself sends out a poor subliminal message that those who do so can act with impunity. That does not strengthen the rule of law.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The Justice Secretary will know of the hard work undertaken in this Parliament to bring the Desecration of War Memorials Bill into law. Elements of that Bill were subsumed into the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, but will he now undertake to complete the job?

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is one of two hon. Members who have fought hard on this issue, and he does so from the position of having served his country. It is completely iniquitous that people should seek to act in a way that desecrates war memorials. His specific point seems utterly compelling and I am happy to discuss it with him hereafter.

T9. [900229] **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Justice Secretary is an experienced lawyer, for whom I have a great deal of respect. Will he explain to the Prime Minister that following the Supreme Court's judgment on Rwanda, merely to legislate that the facts on the ground in Rwanda are the opposite of what the Supreme Court found them to be will make no difference to the problems the Supreme Court has identified, and will simply make the Government a laughing stock?

Alex Chalk: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her point. At the risk of harming her political career, the respect is entirely mutual. In a rule-of-law country, people can disagree with the decision of a court but they must respect it. We respect the ruling and of course we will abide by court orders, but it is also right that we carefully consider what the Supreme Court said and seek to adjust appropriately. We will do what we properly and lawfully can do to stop the boats. That is our mission and the mission of the British people, and we will deliver on it.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend's commitment to increase the use of tagging, where appropriate, to reduce the amount of reoffending. In doing so, what plans does he have to include high-risk domestic abusers and, potentially in the future, those who are illegal drug users?

Alex Chalk: Not for the first or last time, my hon. and learned Friend has got absolutely to the point. We have deliberately constructed the policy so that if an individual presents a significant threat to a particular individual—often a spouse or a partner—the presumption would not apply. That is critically important and I was happy to discuss that point with Women's Aid and other relevant bodies. We are on the side of victims of domestic abuse and violence, and nothing that we do will cut across that important principle.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Supporting offenders in practising their faith is regularly cited as playing a key role in their rehabilitation in prisons. However, as the Minister will know from my frequent correspondence with the chief executive of His Majesty's Prison Service, many prisons either do not provide the facilities required or actively hinder offenders in practising

their religion. HMP Full Sutton has been brought to my attention as one such example. Given its importance, will the Minister assure me that a full review of faith provision across the prison estate will be conducted and guarantee that no one will be denied the ability to freely practise their religion?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. He is absolutely right to highlight not only the right of people to practise their religion, but the important role that that can play for those individuals in coping with prison life, rehabilitation and getting on the straight and narrow when they come out. I am happy to engage with him directly on any specific case that he wishes to bring up, and it is an issue that I am happy to look at.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the Courts Minister for his recent letter on recruitment and retention of legal advisers in Essex and the impact that that is having on court listings. Although I know that he and I agree about the independence of the judiciary regarding individual cases, will he meet me to discuss what more might be done to fill the vacancies for legal advisers in Essex?

Mike Freer: I am always happy to meet my right hon. Friend.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Secretary of State has alluded to the continuing reduction in reoffending rates among those leaving prison. Does he agree that central to maintaining confidence in the wider community is that the reoffending rate goes down further still?

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman makes a simple but incredibly important point. We want to follow the evidence so that we protect the public. We will do so, on the one hand, by locking up the most serious offenders for longer and taking them out of circulation, and, on the other, by cutting offending. Fewer crimes mean a better protected public. That is the approach that we will take.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Yesterday, I met former prisoner LJ Flanders who, while serving his sentence, devised a fitness regime that can be conducted in a cell with no special gym equipment. With the support of Bucks Association for the Care of Offenders, he has just run a two-week training programme in HMP Aylesbury to train other prisoners to provide coaching and mentoring of a similar style. Will my right hon. Friend please encourage everybody in His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, particularly governors, to facilitate such courses to reduce reoffending?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who knows about what he speaks. I pay tribute to him for his work in the criminal justice system. He highlights an example that sounds extremely interesting. I would be happy to meet him to hear more about it and to see where we can take things from there.

International Development White Paper

12.37 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Mr Deputy Speaker, since my statement to the House on 18 July, the Government have consulted extensively to secure evidence and ideas on international development that will transform our world. I pay tribute to the team of 15 officials who have worked night and day and most of their weekends for nearly six months on this, under the leadership of Nick Dyer and Annabel Gerry, and to Geraldine Bedell and the Richard Curtis team who have helped with the shortened version of the international development White Paper.

We drew on the sharpest and most expert minds from non-governmental organisations, academia, business, nearly 50 Governments around the world, and all political parties in the House. I particularly wish to thank colleagues across the House for their contributions to shaping this White Paper. This is an area of policy that does not belong either to the Conservative party or to Labour; it is a British policy and commitment.

As the whole House knows, development has helped transform the lives of billions of people. The UK can be immensely proud of our distinct contribution to this incredible success story. Two centuries ago, three quarters of the world lived in extreme poverty. When I was born, around half still did. By 2015, when the world met the millennium development goals, the proportion of a much larger global population had fallen to just 12%. Evidence shows that development works, but it also shows that we now need to think about how we do development.

After decades of hard-won but persistent progress, we live in a world facing a daunting set of challenges: a world that is seeing rising poverty, where progress is in retreat; a world where the UN sustainable development goals are nearly all off track for 2030; a world where faith in multilateral institutions is fading despite co-operation being desperately needed; a world facing a climate crisis, growing conflict and the prospect of further pandemics; a contested world, where unity and solidarity are increasingly important, yet ever more difficult to achieve. This White Paper sets out a road map to 2030, charting the path the UK must take to galvanise global attention and lead by example in the fight to end extreme poverty, tackle climate change and address biodiversity loss.

When it comes to international development, finance matters. The Government have been clear on our intention to return to 0.7% of GNI when the fiscal circumstances permit, but the White Paper also makes it clear that we will not achieve the sustainable development goals through business-as-usual official development assistance funding. We need a quantum leap in financing and investing, which only the private sector can provide. The private sector is an essential engine of development, giving communities the building blocks for economic independence. Self-sufficiency is development's essential purpose, and our work with the UK private sector delivers back for taxpayers many times over.

British Investment International, formerly known as CDC, is already a core part of the Government's offer on international development. It has an impressive track

record, and now will go further and faster, investing in the hardest places. As was suggested by the International Development Committee, to whom I pay tribute, BII will aim to make more than half of its investments in the poorest and most fragile countries by 2030, while also enhancing its transparency, cementing its place as a world leader.

The White Paper presents our vision for much-needed reform of the international financial system, mobilising greater finance from the private sector and scaling up the lending capacity of the international financial institutions. The UK has pioneered the use of climate-resilient debt clauses, enabling vulnerable countries to hold off on debt repayments following an extreme weather event. Together with Prime Minister Mia Mottley and other supporters of the Bridgetown initiative, we are driving reforms of the multilateral development banks so that they can scale up financing for low and middle-income countries. We will also work with institutional investors such as pension funds to plug the SDG's \$3.9 trillion annual financing gap.

International development and climate action are inseparable. Climate change and nature loss are being felt everywhere, and their impact will only intensify over the next decade. It will be most acute in developing countries, reversing fragile development gains, increasing food prices and compounding insecurity and instability. To meet that challenge, we must mobilise more—and more reliable—finance. We will deliver on our pledge to provide £11.6 billion in international climate finance in the five years up to 2026. We will ensure a balance between adaptation and mitigation financing and provide at least £3 billion to protect and restore nature.

Britain's work on women and girls is paramount. We cannot understand development unless we see it through the eyes of girls and women. Increasing access to education, empowering women so that they can decide for themselves whether and when they have children, and ending sexual violence are central to economic opportunity and growth. Those rights are universal and should be non-negotiable. The White Paper extends and reinvigorates that work. We will use research and diplomacy to end the preventable deaths of mothers, babies and children. We will deploy policy and investment to defend and advance sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Effective development is rooted in respectful partnerships of equals, but the Government will continue to stand up for our values. We know that individual rights, the rule of law and strong institutions are essential to achieving sustainable development. Take for example the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, to which Members of Parliament make such a substantial contribution. It is the UK's leading champion of democracy globally. We are increasing our support for its work so that we can support fairer, more inclusive and more accountable democratic systems around the world.

We must also find better ways to anticipate and prevent humanitarian crises and the conflicts that often drive them. Conflict and instability are on the rise and hold back development: by 2030 up to two thirds of the world's poor will live in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Humanitarian needs are at their highest since 1945, with twice as many people needing assistance compared with five years ago. The resulting devastation is spreading across affected regions, as seen at present in the Sahel and the middle east. The tragic events in Israel

and Gaza bring home the humanitarian costs of conflict and violence, with women and children most directly affected.

I am therefore pleased to announce today that we will create a fund dedicating up to 15% of our bilateral humanitarian spend to support resilience and adaptation alongside our delivery of humanitarian relief, which we expect to amount to £1 billion next year. When I visited families in east Africa suffering the worst drought in 40 years, it was clear that the current focus on immediate relief comes at the cost of early thinking and building in resilience and adaptation for the future. The new fund will respond directly to that specific challenge.

Innovation is at the heart of our efforts to transform lives through sustainable growth. The wondrous creativity of science and technology can address problems that money alone will never solve. Only by sharing research and innovating together can we make the breakthroughs that our world needs. The world has never been so intimately connected, nor our fates so closely entwined. Although we can rightly be proud of all we have done to deliver international development, the UK and our global partners must redouble our efforts given the challenges that we faced to achieve those goals.

We asked in the White Paper what the UK could do. We were told to make a new development offer based on mutual respect, powered by finance at scale, and supported by a more responsive international system. We have listened: that is what the White Paper will deliver. The Prime Minister has launched the White Paper to do development more effectively and differently, and yesterday's global food security summit was an example of that. I commend this statement to the House.

12.46 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, for advance sight of the White Paper, and for our frequent conversations about it since I was appointed to my post.

The catastrophe in Gaza is a strong reminder not just of the need for humanitarian assistance and expertise, but of the heavy responsibility that we all face to play our part in the world through the painstaking hard yards of diplomacy, and of the crucial role of development in providing the hope that breathes life into any peace process. I thank the Minister for his personal efforts to bring some energy and direction to this agenda again. In fact, I would go as far as saying that I do not believe that the House would be in a position to consider a new White Paper were he not in post—a view that I think is shared by many on the Opposition Benches.

However, to have an honest conversation about where we are heading, we need a frank assessment of where we have been. There was the mindless vandalism of the decision to take one of our most respected, influential contributions to the world—the partnerships, thought leadership and innovation—and trash the lot to deflect from a domestic crisis. There was the former Prime Minister who, shamed by a young footballer into abandoning his decision to allow children to go hungry in a pandemic, pulled the rug out from under the poorest people in the poorest countries. Make no mistake: that cost lives, but it also cost Britain its reputation as a gold-standard leader in the field. As the Minister said then, it was

“a strategic mistake with deadly consequences.”—[*Official Report*, 2 March 2021; Vol. 690, c. 118.]

He knows that I admire his determination to speak out against those decisions, and I know that he does not shy away from acknowledging the damage that they have done.

Although the former Prime Minister may be gone, his second in command, whose signature is scrawled across those documents, now sits in No. 10. His short words at the start of the White Paper leave me in no doubt that, although his posture has changed, his position has not. Frankly, asking the man who signed off the devastation of this vital agenda, only to breathe new life into it again, is like calling out the arsonist to put out the fire. For much of the agenda that the Minister set out today, he will have our support. The question is whether he will have that of his Prime Minister.

The Minister is right to recognise that the major obstacle to eliminating extreme poverty is the growing challenge of climate change and debt, but the key is how to resolve it. The multilateral system is strained—much of the world's debt is owed to private creditors, and over recent decades China's influence has grown—so we strongly welcome the recognition in the White Paper that Britain's approach to development must sit in a multipolar world. However, multilateral aid will fall to just 25% of aid spending by 2025. Although the commitments in this White Paper are welcome, the Minister is prioritising multilateralism while his Department prioritises bilateralism. Which is it? We have a strategy at odds with the ambition.

The second problem is that to make the strategy work, the Minister will need to convince the world that Britain is a long-term reliable partner with serious commitment at the highest levels of Government, yet his own White Paper is silent on protecting the overseas development assistance budget from raids from other Departments, after 30% has been raided in the past year by the Home Office alone to pay for spiralling hotel bills and the cost of this Government's chaos. What chance does he have of convincing the world that this area is a priority for the Government if he cannot convince his colleagues around the Cabinet table? I suspect that on the central issue—the need to deal with debt and finance constraints that block action on climate—he and I have more in common than he does with most of them.

There is much to welcome in the White Paper, but access to finance for many of the most heavily indebted countries is ultimately unachievable. He is embracing some of the new ideas on finance, but when it comes to the central issue of debt, where is the fresh thinking? The outsized role of the City of London compels us to do more. Now is the time not to cling to existing strategies, but to leave no stone unturned.

The problem of climate finance and debt for middle-income countries enables us to focus on low-income countries and the core task of eliminating extreme poverty, but there is far too little in the White Paper about how that can be achieved. We welcome the focus on conflict, but the route out of poverty lies not just in access to finance and in functioning economies, but in self-sustaining health, education and welfare systems designed and run by the people in those countries. What can he do to reassure the House that that is not a second-order issue?

[Lisa Nandy]

Finally, the Minister and I have discussed the central importance of women and girls many times. They have been among the biggest losers of the decisions of recent decades. Empowering them is the biggest untapped driver of growth in the global economy, and there is no way of meeting the sustainable development goals without closing that shameful gap. That is why they must run like a thread through the whole agenda—not just in addition to it, and not a few pages in a document. Every single decision that comes across his desk must consider whether it does more to empower and enable women and girls to succeed, or less.

I welcome and support the Minister's commitment to this agenda, but without the political backing, without the budget and without the priority in Government, he will not succeed. He is far more alive to the scale and nature of the problems that Britain and the world face than most of his colleagues, but the challenges of this era demand an end to old ways of thinking and an embracing of the new. I know he is open to it, but are his Government?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her co-operation and her kind personal remarks. She will know that, in order to get buy-in from our friends and experts around the world and from the civil service, the White Paper needed to run to 2030. In the unlikely event that my party is not in government after the next election, any other Government would, I hope, build on it to make it a huge success.

I note the hon. Lady's remarks about the merger of DFID into the Foreign Office. My task, which the Prime Minister gave me, was to try to make the merger work. That means there needs to be an ability within Government to focus on global public goods and delivering them into the 2030s. That is what I am trying to do. She rightly asks how we get the balance right between multilateralism and bilateral funding. The answer is that we use either, depending on what delivers for our taxpayers and what delivers results on the ground. That is the yardstick; there is no ideology. We go with what works and what is best.

The hon. Lady pointed out the increase in spending in other Departments of ODA money and the development budget. It is true that that has gone up, but every penny is spent within the rules laid down by the OECD Development Assistance Committee. We brought in the innovation of the ODA star chamber in Whitehall, co-chaired by the Development Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. There is already clear evidence of that ratcheting up the quality of ODA, as the hon. Lady would wish.

The hon. Lady talked about access to finance for poor countries, which is incredibly important. Mitigation projects in middle-income countries are easy by contrast; when it comes to poor countries and adaptation, it is much more difficult. She will see the emphasis in the White Paper on accepting the advice from the Select Committee on increasing the amount that British International Investment does in poor countries. She will notice, too, the emphasis on social protection, and the fact that 62% of the budget will now be spent in fragile and conflict states.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about debt, where she is right that we need to do far more. It is absurd that a country such as Ghana can borrow only for seven or eight years, yet our children can get mortgages for 30 years. Ghana borrows at 7%, and our children borrow at 2%. That is clearly completely wrong, but there is a lot of new thinking. She will have seen the climate resilient debt clauses launched by Britain and the work we are doing on the G20 common framework to increase access for countries. It is also important to ensure that the private sector is bound into debt settlements when they affect sovereign states.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the White Paper and its focus on using ODA to leverage private sector investment in the way that my right hon. Friend has described. Whether the MENTARI programme for energy transition in Indonesia or the guarantees that the UK provides to the African Development Bank on climate finance, does he agree that it is the combination of aid and British business that is a real force multiplier in this area?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend knows a great deal about this area from his past ministerial posts, and he is absolutely right. The key trick is to secure the status money, whether provided by the multilateral banks or the development finance institutions, and to marry it with the private sector and the \$60 trillion of pension funds out there. If we can marry the two, de-risk through using that status money, and show pension managers what the real risk and the scale of the returns are, we can achieve the holy grail of getting enormous amounts of more money into climate finance, mitigation and adaptation, which is what the Bridgetown agenda is all about.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The Minister has consulted widely, and he truly has a refreshingly collaborative cross-party approach. We in the SNP broadly welcome the tone of it and some of the detail around mutual respect, listening to local partners, the recognition of civil society and the potential role of diaspora communities. However, the Minister will not be surprised that we want him to go further, and I will list a few of the things I would like to hear more about. SNP colleagues will have more to add on that.

The first and probably the most important thing is the fact that there is no concrete recommitment to 0.7%, as recommended by the International Development Committee. In the entire document of 154 pages, there is one mention of 0.7%, where the White Paper states that the Government will recommit to it

“once the fiscal situation allows.”

If the fiscal situation currently allows for tax cuts, I would say that that moment has arrived. The new Foreign Secretary was instrumental in getting us to 0.7% in the first place, so I hope that he and the Minister will expedite that intention.

Secondly, there is no recommitment to the restoration of programmes that have been cut since 2021, including in Yemen, Syria, Somalia and South Sudan, all of which had cuts of more than 50%, taking several million

pounds of their support away. Those nations are all suffering significant repercussions from the climate crisis and the fallout from conflict.

Although I am pleased that women and girls and gender equality are to be put at the centre of bilateral funding, stakeholders have said to me this morning that it is short of the transformative approach espoused by others, including the Scottish Government. Let us not forget that the cuts I just mentioned extended to girls' education programmes, which is estimated to have resulted in 700,000 fewer girls receiving an education. That is one of the greatest scandals of our lifetime.

Finally, I was surprised that there was nothing in the White Paper about public perception of international aid and how we can challenge and change it. I have my own thoughts on that, but if most right-thinking people understood the role that their Government and their predecessors had played in some of these countries over centuries, and the ongoing legacy of that, they would understand that we have moral obligations. I know the Minister agrees, so I would appreciate his assurance that the omission of that point was simply an oversight. I look forward to continuing with the collaborative approach that he has brought to the role.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her party's collaboration and for the tone and content of what she said. She mentioned that the 0.7% figure does not feature extensively in the White Paper, but the White Paper is about doing development in a different way. We are ratcheting in, through these new mechanisms, billions and billions of pounds, which makes a huge difference. In many ways, it dwarfs the difference between the 0.51% or 0.52% that we are spending at the moment, and the 0.7%. She will have seen at the time of the autumn statement last year that the Treasury estimate of when the two fiscal tests would be satisfied was 2028-29—in March, it was 2027-28. All of us hope that the two tests will be satisfied as soon as possible. As far as I am aware, there is no difference between the policy of the Government and that of the official Opposition on the restoration of the 0.7% target. She talked about cuts in programmes, but the White Paper explains how many of the programmes will be increased. She specifically mentions South Sudan. As the budget is now in much better shape, next year the bilateral programme spending in South Sudan will increase from £47.9 million to £110 million, which is an increase of 130%. The Kenyan bilateral programme spending will increase by 225% and the Jordanian one will increase by 130%. So we are now able to do more through our bilateral programmes. She asked in which areas we would be specifically restoring funding where cuts had been made; she will see in the White Paper that the International Citizen Service is set to return and our aid match will increase. As for the humanitarian work we will do next year, we expect to spend £1 billion on humanitarian relief, plus we have the new resilience and adaptation fund, which will produce an extra 15% on that. The White Paper is long and to many of us it is a most exciting read. A short form is available—I have a copy here—as I mentioned. Thanks to the Richard Curtis team, it is also an excellent read. She chides me for not having made the point about civil society and the platform, but I am delighted to tell her that although I did not mention it in the statement, it is in there; UKDev—UK International

Development—is a platform to achieve precisely what she said needs to be achieved in that bridge between civil society and Government and state work.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): May I push back gently on what was said by the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), because many Conservative Members are passionate about this issue, have been supportive of the Minister through thick and thin and really welcome this White Paper? We are hoping that it will be a stepping stone to 0.7% ODA spend. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a symbiotic relationship between our economy and our security, and that our security is dependent on stability abroad? When we step back from helping fragile states, that void is too often filled by authoritarian regimes pursuing a very different agenda.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is right on that, and of course he was one of the 26 Conservative Members who voted not to cut the 0.7%. I hope that he will be energised by the alternative means we have found—the multipliers to ratchet in enormous amounts of money. He is right in what he says about the link between defence, development and diplomacy. When he gets a moment to read to read this White Paper, he will be enthused by the lines it is taking.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour, knows that I admire much about the mission he has set out in this White Paper, but chapter 3 needed to say a lot more about the money. He could have said more about doubling the fraction of the special drawing rights we share, as Japan is doing, which would have provided an extra £4 billion of development assistance. He could have said more about using the money we get back from the European Investment Bank to invest in building a bigger World Bank in order to unlock \$200 billion of concessional lending over the decade ahead. He could have said more about leading a global initiative to keep the interest rate on special drawing rights down so that the International Monetary Fund remains as lender of last resort, rather than China. Those are practical steps that we could work on together—otherwise we end up with all mission and no model, which will not help the world's poorest.

Mr Mitchell: If the right hon. Gentleman reads with care the chapter to which he referred, he will see that it is one of the most brilliant chapters in it—that is my biased opinion. The reason for that is that we have in Washington an extraordinary team of young and brilliant officials who have enormous influence in the World Bank, and he is a considerable expert on this area. As for the multipliers and making sure that we sweat the balance sheets of these multilateral banks to ratchet in huge amounts of more money, he will see a great deal to please him. If these reforms are implemented, as I believe they will be, driven hard by Britain through the multilateral sector, we will see a vast increase in funding. As for what he says about the SDRs, using them creatively is something we are keen to do. He will recall that at the spring meetings the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that Britain would use its SDRs to the tune of £5.3 billion to elevate the two IMF funds that directly deal with poverty and international development.

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): “People, planet, prosperity” is summed up entirely in this document, and I commend my right hon. Friend on the White Paper, particularly chapter 5, which I am passionate about. Building on chapter 3, it is vital that we accelerate the transition and support the Bridgetown initiative. Countries are getting terribly frustrated that although the talk is done and the UK is exceptional, there is a need to make sure that banks are getting the money to the people so that the projects can deliver for people, prosperity and planet.

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. Friend for the tremendous contribution she has made on the matters she is addressing. Chapter 5 directly addresses tackling climate change and biodiversity loss, and delivering economic transformation, and I am glad it has her approval. Chapter 3 deals with mobilising the money and what I described in my response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), the former Deputy Prime Minister, as the “multipliers” and how we ratchet in private sector money. Those will make a fantastic difference and we also have to make sure that this money reaches the poorest people in the world. Britain’s role in the G7, in these international organisations, has always been to focus on the poorest people in the world. We are proud of doing that and the House would expect us to do it. This White Paper amplifies that mission.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Chairperson of the Select Committee on International Development.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Let me start by giving my huge congratulations to the Minister. I hope that the whole House has recognised his personal involvement and the tenacity with which he has got this document out. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] I also congratulate our civil servants, who for the past three years have been doing an amazing job in challenging circumstances. I really hope that this White Paper re-establishes our position on the international stage. I particularly welcome the embedding of localism; more money to the poorest; debt relief; and the focus on atrocity prevention. The White Paper outlines several initiatives aimed at increasing the amount of climate finance available for vulnerable countries such as small island development states, which is welcome. The Minister referenced biodiversity loss a couple of times in his statement, but will he explain why no specific mention is made in the White Paper of the loss and damage fund, which I predict will be at the centre of COP28 in the coming weeks?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chair of the International Development Committee and, through her, all of its members, who bring their expertise and enthusiasm to this subject with eloquence and skill. She mentions the importance of debt relief and localism, and she is absolutely right on that. She also mentions the work on atrocity prevention, which we have particularly been doing in Sudan since the crisis emerged there. That work is very important and we are finding new ways of amplifying it. What she says about biodiversity may well be true. The White Paper runs to 148 pages. If she and I had our way, it would have been longer, but we have to draw a line somewhere and I yield to no one on

the importance of the point she makes about biodiversity. She will know that there has been argument about loss and damage, and a holding position has now been secured, ahead of the COP. That is very important, but loss and damage must do two things. It must get a broader spectrum of where the money is coming from, otherwise we will just be reorienting it within the international development budget and that will be robbing Peter to pay Paul—there is no sense in doing that. The other thing is that it must bring in a wider group of countries, not just the narrow OECD ones that account for aid—it must be wider than that. Those two things are required to make loss and damage work.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I very much welcome this White Paper, which reiterates the importance of eliminating gender-based violence. Last week I worked with parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth, thanks to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and my right hon. Friend’s Department, and we resolved that there is a real need for international leadership to effectively challenge what are still called cultural norms—things such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and rape. Will he join our calls for eliminating gender-based violence to be at the heart of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa next year?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend makes a very interesting point about the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Samoa next year; I will take that away and see what we can do on the matter. Gender-based violence, for the reasons she has often said, is central to what we are doing. We cannot understand all these matters unless we see international development through the eyes of girls and women, so she is absolutely right about that. On gender-based violence, she will be well aware of the work led by my noble Friend Lord Ahmad in the other place, which he continues to do with great vigour and success.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I welcome the White Paper, but I want to put on record very clearly that it is lukewarm and tepid. It shows how much wreckage has been done in the last three years. I welcome the Minister moving it forward, but we are not moving forward enough.

I have three short questions. First, the Minister referred to the Prime Minister asking him to try to make the merger work. We all know it has been a disaster. It was in the press last week that there was no rationale or reason for it to have happened in the first place. I would like to know why there is no thought put behind restoring that separate Department, because it was world-class, and the world looked to it for leadership.

Secondly, the Minister talked about ODA being legal. It might be legal, but one third of the budget—over £3.7 billion—is being spent on domestic issues of asylum seekers, not on extreme poverty, which he just said is a priority.

Lastly, to reiterate the point made by the Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), loss and damage was not mentioned. Two years ago in Scotland, we were world-leading, with the first pledge made by the Scottish Government. When I was at COP27 last year, the UK

Government asked me to go and speak to partners on this. I am happy to do that when I am at COP28 in two weeks' time.

In terms of where the money needs to come from, we need to get behind the Make Polluters Pay programme, which is across the world and is about the largest oil and gas companies that are most responsible for fossil fuels. If we have collective support from this Government and Governments around the world, we will find the money.

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's last point about loss and damage, I set out the position of the Government. Some progress was made against expectations a couple of weekends ago. Expanding the pool from which the money comes—the payers—perhaps in the way he suggests and trying to find a deeper pool than just the development budget is extremely important.

The hon. Gentleman's second point was about the percentage of the development budget that goes to pay the first-year costs of asylum seekers. He will know that that is absolutely part of the rules on the way in which the budget is administered. We would be asking for a change in the OECD Development Assistance Committee rules, which is very difficult to achieve, as we have to get 30 countries to agree. We decided not to do that. We did get an extra £2.5 billion out of the Treasury to compensate for it, and he will have noticed that the figure being spent on that has been quite sharply reducing over recent months.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the merger. My views on the merger before I entered Government were fairly lurid, but surely the right thing to do now is to focus on whether we can create an entity that will deliver the global public goods we all support for the 2030s. If we can, that will be building on when we had two Departments. I notice that the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who speaks for the official Opposition, is nodding at those remarks.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. This is a comprehensive document that contains some really important strategies. I particularly pay tribute to him for the sections on biodiversity, which he knows I regard as enormously important for a variety of reasons. Climate change and the restoration of nature are all part of an essential task that the world faces over the coming years.

My right hon. Friend mentioned civil society, which plays a really important part in all aspects of development. He knows of my involvement in and support for one of Africa's leading conservation NGOs, which does valuable work on the ground in Africa. What routes will be available for that organisation and other civil society organisations in the developing world to access the support set out in this White Paper? What channels should they be using?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments about the importance of nature and biodiversity, which are very prominent in the White Paper. He asks how civil society can access support. The section of the White Paper about the new platform, UKDev, which I hope he will read with interest, talks about engagement with civil society, but there are a number of programmes that meet his suggestion, including the UK Aid Match programme. Where good charities are using their own

money, if the taxpayer puts similar amounts of money alongside that, we are getting two for one—we are getting double the results for the taxpayer's money.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I echo the words of thanks to the Minister for his assiduous engagement, which is incredibly welcome. There is a lot to welcome in this White Paper, including the focus on the SDGs and the climate crisis. From our conversations, he will know that the Liberal Democrats continue to have concerns about the fact that we are not immediately returning to 0.7% and about the restoration of the Department, because this is not just about money—on that we agree; it is about culture. I met an official in one of our east African embassies who told me that, at the moment, the D in FCDO is silent. While no one would question the Minister's commitment to this, it must go beyond one man. What are he and his Department doing to change the culture within the FCDO, so that the D is no longer a whimper but a roar?

Mr Mitchell: I think the D is a good deal less silent than it was. I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said. On the immediate return of the money, she is right; that is the stated policy of the Government and, I think, of the official Opposition. On restoring the Department, I draw her attention to what the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), have said, which is that they have an open mind on this, and they are trying to see where we get to by the time there is a general election, were they to come into government. If we can produce something that is better than the two separate Departments and delivers global public goods in the 2030s, that might well be seen by everyone as a step forward.

The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) is right about the cultural point. To make a merger work—there is no such thing as a merger; one side wins and one side loses, as I learned many years ago in the City of London—the culture is very important. If development practitioners and experts are respected by the traditional British Foreign Office and they work together, as they have done on putting this White Paper together, that is a very great strength indeed.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): One reason the SDGs are off track is that they have not to date recognised that leaving someone behind, whether out of education, a job, healthcare or otherwise, simply on account of their religion or beliefs means they will be poorer. Discrimination and persecution are drivers of poverty, affecting millions globally. I warmly congratulate the Minister on listening and including clear recognition of this in several places in the White Paper, but words need to be turned into action. What action is planned to ensure that religious minorities are taken into account in the design of development assistance programmes and in the forthcoming review of the SDGs?

Mr Mitchell: I am very glad that my hon. Friend—who is, after all, the Government's envoy on these matters—has already read the White Paper so assiduously. She will, as she said, have noted that there is a clear commitment to

[Mr Mitchell]

do what she sets out, and I have every confidence that working with her, the Government will be able to advance that important agenda.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I also add my congratulations and broad support for the progress in the White Paper, but may I draw the Minister's attention to the position in Gaza, particularly in relation to humanitarian relief? On top of the 13,000 civilian deaths, half of whom are children, nearly all power plants, hospitals, and water desalination and sewage plants have been destroyed. Does the Minister agree that 20 to 30 trucks of humanitarian assistance a day is a drop in the ocean compared with the 450 a day that were being delivered previously, and that what is really needed is a ceasefire and a peace process resulting in a safe and secure Palestinian and Israeli state?

Mr Mitchell: I think everyone is praying that a peace process will start as soon as possible. We need to get a political track, and as the hon. Lady will know, we are pressing for humanitarian pauses to achieve what she wants us to achieve. I provided a statement to the House last week, and indeed the week before; both went on for an hour and a half and involved 70 Members asking questions, so I do not wish to try Mr Deputy Speaker's patience by addressing that point directly. However, in the White Paper, the hon. Lady will be able to see Britain's commitment to humanitarian relief.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): The White Paper is a great blueprint for the UK to once again be a global leader in the fight against antimicrobial resistance, but as my right hon. Friend knows very well, we cannot do this alone. Will he work with his global counterparts and use the White Paper as a platform ahead of the UN General Assembly high-level meeting on AMR, so that we can build the global consensus to tackle it head-on?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of AMR, and we certainly aspire to be a global leader in that area. As he knows, I spoke about AMR when I was in New York earlier this year, and we are guided specifically by Sally Davies, the master of Trinity College Cambridge and former chief medical officer, who is an expert on this matter. AMR is now the world's third biggest killer after strokes and heart attacks, and we will be prioritising it in the way that my hon. Friend suggests.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): There is a welcome change of tone in the White Paper—the language about partnership, for example, will not be unfamiliar to those of us who have worked with the Scotland-Malawi partnership for many years. However, in all the “Britain is great” language, I cannot see much recognition of the incredible work that has been done over many years by the devolved Administrations, particularly the Scottish Government, who have ambitions further to the UK Government's on the empowerment of women and girls and, indeed, loss and damage. Can the Minister confirm that the work of the devolved Administrations in international development, and particularly the work of the Scottish Government, is recognised, accepted and valued by the UK Government, given that they count that spending towards the ODA target?

Mr Mitchell: First, I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to the White Paper, and for bringing the expertise that he deploys in the International Development Committee to bear on it. We did indeed consult the devolved Administrations; I myself had, I think, two very useful discussions with the Government of Scotland. As the hon. Gentleman knows, I share his view that the work Scotland has done in places such as Malawi is highly effective.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This outstanding White Paper focuses on a locally led approach to development because, as the Minister has said, co-operation and partnerships are the way forward. As chair of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's commitment to increase grant in aid to the WFD's partnerships for fairer, more inclusive, and accountable democratic systems around the world. For the benefit of my right hon. Friend and the House, may I also highlight that the Cabinet Office's conflict, security and stability fund recently scored all 103 of its successful bidders, and the WFD came top?

Mr Mitchell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he does as chair of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. He will know that the team that put together the White Paper looked carefully at what the WFD does, and recognised the unique contribution it makes, supported as it is across the House and in the other place. I am very glad that, following the public accountability process—which, as my hon. Friend knows, is going on at the moment—we expect to be able to substantially reinforce the funding for the WFD.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), our foreign affairs spokesperson, I welcome many aspects of the White Paper. However, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls, I was interested in the case study in the paper that stated that the Government

“will invest further to support women's full participation in all political dialogue”.

I place on record my thanks to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee for inviting former Afghan MP and Deputy Speaker Fawzia Koofi to appear before it. What steps is the Minister going to take to ensure that full participation? Is he speaking to Afghan female leaders here and in Afghanistan, and how is that happening in the context of budget cuts in the region?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady knows, next year, we will increase bilateral funding to Afghanistan to £151 million. We are able to do that because the budget is much more carefully targeted and is now properly cultivated to deliver results. On the subject of education and of the treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan, which is absolutely abhorrent, we do everything we can through various mechanisms, including the Afghanistan World Bank trust fund, to boost those important objectives. As the hon. Lady would expect, we focus on trying to win results with that money—which is paid by the British taxpayer—in the best way we possibly can.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As this excellent paper sets out, the rise in autocratisation, the rise in humanitarian need, and the row-back of women's rights

are all terrifying. They are often linked, and it is women's voices that are being silenced across the world. A woman's right to education, to employment and to contraception are basic, fundamental rights. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we really care for the world's most vulnerable women, we should set aside our party political differences in this House, and get behind this White Paper and make sure its objectives are delivered for women?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend speaks with great wisdom; from what we have heard today, her final point is clearly being achieved, which is very welcome. What she says about women's voices being silenced and their fundamental rights being fettered is, I fear, absolutely right, and the White Paper addresses that head-on. We are finding ways of stopping impunity and calling to account those people who abuse human rights in a number of new ways that target accountability, and which I know my right hon. Friend—who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan—welcomes.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his important statement and White Paper. He has stated that humanitarian needs are at their highest level since 1945, and has also rightly stated that the devastating events in Israel and Gaza bring home the humanitarian cost of conflict, which was so powerfully expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). He will agree that humanitarian and development co-operation are key to British foreign policy, so could he outline the Government's commitment to supporting the ongoing work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the important development and humanitarian work in the middle east, particularly with UNRWA having lost so many staff in Gaza? That ongoing work is needed, both now and for the long term.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point about the increase in humanitarian need—as she rightly, says, it has increased significantly—that I set out in my statement. That is why we have found £1,000 million to allocate in a budget for tackling humanitarian need next year. If she has a chance to look at the White Paper, she will see that it includes the resilience adaptation fund, which is designed to ensure that when crises take place, we can do things such as provide for greater irrigation, water retention and reservoir capacity in a drought, so that in the event that such crises take place again—which, alas, happens all too often—their impact is not as great as before.

The hon. Lady asks specifically about UNRWA. As we know, a very large number of UNRWA humanitarian workers have lost their lives, along with others, in the Gazan conflict. Any attack and any loss of life by a humanitarian worker is deeply to be regretted. Those are people who have put themselves in harm's way for fellow members of humanity. They are unarmed and just trying to do good to their fellow citizens. On the humanitarian need overall, climate change has particularly exacerbated that, and it is of course the poorest who are hit first and hardest, as the White Paper emphasises.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The lack of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in developing countries particularly affects women, especially during

childbirth, when they are routinely prescribed prophylactic antibiotics, and a greater number of women suffer from urinary tract infections when toilet facilities are absent. What discussions will the Minister have with partners at COP28 to further the WASH—water, sanitation and hygiene—agenda?

Mr Mitchell: I anticipate, along with my colleagues, having many such discussions, and not only at COP but in other fora. My hon. Friend is entirely right that the absence of water and hygiene facilities hits girls in particular and stops many from going to school. He will know that Education Cannot Wait—an international fund strongly supported by the British taxpayer, to which we allocated £80 million earlier this year—is able directly to help people caught up in conflict in that way. We want them to go to school and they often cannot do so, for the reasons he has given, and Education Cannot Wait tries to alleviate that directly.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I welcome the White Paper and commend the Minister for his persistence on this issue. Does he agree that, in order to maintain public support for programmes such as those outlined in the White Paper, we need to clamp down vigorously on any misappropriation of funds—in the past that has happened in some of these nations—so that the money goes to those who need it, not those who have easier access to it?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member is right to make it clear that corruption is the cancer in international development spending. That is why we always ensure that, if there is any hint of that, we intervene immediately to stop it. It is also one of the reasons why we so seldom work directly through budget support, where we cannot track so easily the way taxpayers' money is being spent, but allocate very directly in a way that we—and, more importantly, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact—can properly hold to account.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I, like the Minister, find this White Paper to be an enlightening and exciting read. It goes a long way to setting out our stall for what we want to do on international development, and I commend the civil servants and special advisers for their work on it. It identifies localism, partnership and transparency as being at its core, but could the Minister just say a little more about mobilising finance through British International Investment, and whether more risk needs to be taken in less economically developed countries? As chair of a group supported by HALO and of the Conservative Friends of International Development, I also welcome the focus on conflict prevention and the opportunities to build resilience and adaptation. Could the Minister please say a little more about that, and how this fund is going to work to help in those areas?

Mr Mitchell: I am not remotely surprised that my hon. Friend has already read the whole paper—all 148 pages. It is two pages shorter than the White Paper produced in 2009, but I beg to suggest that it is a rather better read. On BII, we have taken the advice of the Select Committee, recognising that it could do more in the poorest and most difficult countries. BII is investing in a port in Somalia, which, as he will understand, is

[Mr Mitchell]

quite a gritty thing to do, but we will see the funding to the poorest countries from BII rise in the period to 2030 from about 38% to 50%. That is a very significant increase, and one that the Select Committee has urged us to embrace. HALO is a brilliant charity that does work far beyond just dealing with high explosives, and we give it our strong support.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): The White Paper's focus on fragile and conflict-affected states is to be welcomed, but the Minister will know that, due to their very nature, these can be the most difficult places to operate in. Will he commit to reporting annually to the House so that we can monitor progress on the strategy?

Mr Mitchell: Conflict-affected and fragile states are indeed the most difficult places in which to operate, but they are also two of the most important types of place in which to operate. The hon. Member will be interested to know that, while over half of the development budget goes to the least developed countries, something like 62% goes to fragile and conflict-affected states. There is no doubt that the Select Committee and ICAI will ensure that the focus he requests is maintained.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and the White Paper. Having had just one or two months to speak to my constituents, I know that many of them felt a real sense of dismay about the lack of global action and national leadership on these issues. The welcome return to the focus on the development goals and recognition of the importance of co-ordinated action on the causes and consequences of climate change globally will go down very well with many of my constituents. Although I welcome the recognition of the challenges posed by the barriers to finance and the burden of debt mentioned in the White Paper and the Minister's remarks, I fear that a lack of ambition in this area may undermine some of the goals set out today. Can the Minister commit to bringing forward in due course further legislative action to ensure that we tackle that burden appropriately, including on private finance, and so have the real ambition we need to see on this agenda?

Mr Mitchell: Ambition is not lacking, but driving these things forward takes an enormous amount of time and is subject to international co-operation, as the hon. Member suggests. However, if he looks at British leadership on climate resilient debt clauses, for example—we introduced them and UK Export Finance, which is the export credits guarantee department of the British Government, is championing them—he will see that these clauses make an enormous difference. For example, if the Government of Ghana are hit by a pandemic, they need all their liquidity to look after their own citizens, but they have to pay interest and capital on their debt. What these clauses mean is that they would get a two-year window during which they can spend their liquidity on their own citizens. That is a small but vital and very impactful innovation. Britain has produced these clauses, and we have done the right thing on that.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister is absolutely right to say that international development and climate change are inseparable, and I commend him for his work in this area. However, many of my constituents have written to me to express frustration about how little the Government are doing at home to attain the sustainable developing goals, and they rightly ask how we can ask other countries to do what we are not doing ourselves. So what does the Minister think I should say to my constituents who are so concerned about the absence of any measures in the King's Speech against fossil fuels and about tackling poverty at home?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. and learned Member will have seen the huge commitment that Britain has made through the Green Climate Fund internationally. I think that we can be very proud of the leadership that we are giving through the green climate fund, of which we are now the co-chair. On UK achievement of the SDGs, she may recall that in 2019 there was an audit of how Britain was doing. Britain came out very well from that audit, and we will of course have a further audit in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring that women and girls have the same opportunities within the labour market as men. That could potentially add trillions of pounds more to global GDP in 2025. What steps will and can the Minister take to ensure that women and girls internationally have the means necessary to improve the societies they live in and to accelerate their development, which we all wish to see?

Mr Mitchell: The former Foreign Secretary unveiled Britain's new women and girls strategy in Sierra Leone this year. It is a very good read—if I may add it to the hon. Member's reading on international development. I was not an unalloyed fan of the merger, as he knows, but when I got back into the Government I saw that the Foreign Office had completely internalised the importance of putting girls and women right at the centre of everything we do in this area, and it is to be commended for that.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The Minister is exactly right to say that little development happens in the absence of security. Speaking in 2014, before he joined the Government and during Israel's Operation Protective Edge, he said that a ceasefire in Gaza should be made permanent before talks move on to addressing wider issues in the middle east peace process. Does he now agree that talks addressing the underlying grievances of the moderates would be part of a successful counter-insurgency campaign, part of bringing about greater security, and hence would foster international development in the middle east?

Mr Mitchell: The quote that the hon. Gentleman found from 2014 was made in very different circumstances, but he is right to say that development will almost always fail where there is no security. Indeed, as Sir Paul Collier memorably said, conflict is “development in reverse”. On the middle east and Gaza—that is not, of course, the subject of the statement, Mr Deputy Speaker—the sooner we can move to a political track in the region, at the United Nations and in the international

Assemblies, and start working on what a future two-state solution would look like, with a state for both Israel and Palestine, the better.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): That concludes the statement on the international development White Paper. I thank the Minister for yet another marathon question and answer session.

Veterans Welfare Services

1.40 pm

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs (Johnny Mercer): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to update the House on the work that the Government are doing to ensure that our welfare services for veterans are fit for the future.

Under this Prime Minister, what it feels like to be a veteran has fundamentally transformed, with the introduction of defined pathways for veterans to access support, including with housing and healthcare, backed by record amounts of Government funding. As we continue to pave the way forward, we knew the time was right to look back and consider carefully the efficiency and effectiveness of pre-existing services, including some services under the banner of Veterans UK. That is why in March this year my right hon. Friend the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families and I informed the House that we had commissioned an independent review into a total of seven bodies, including the Veterans Welfare Service, Defence Transition Services and Veterans' Gateway, which I was pleased was published in full in July.

The welfare services review contained recommendations to improve and simplify welfare provision for veterans across a variety of channels, and it marked the first time that those services had been considered in the round, looking at their role, scope and breadth. The Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families and I welcome the review's findings as an important step in making the UK the best place in the world to be a veteran.

The Government have already committed to responding formally to the review by the end of the year, but Members of the House and their constituents rightly expect an update from me on what progress we have made so far. I am therefore delighted to announce that the Government accept the principles behind the vast majority of the review's 35 strategic and operational recommendations. Thanks to close collaboration between the Ministry of Defence and the Office for Veterans' Affairs, I am pleased to update the House on how this Government are taking decisive steps to deliver a number of the review's recommendations.

First, the "Veterans UK" branding will be retired in 2024, with the Government announcing a replacement in due course. Indeed, as the review acknowledged, staff involved in delivering welfare services for veterans sincerely care about their work, but sometimes analogue processes have historically hampered the level of service provided. With initiatives such as the Government digitalisation programme, backed by £40 million of Government funding, we are confident that the experience of service users will be genuinely transformed. The retirement of the "Veterans UK" branding marks a clean break from the past, and represents a vital step forward in regaining trust between the service and its users.

Secondly, The word "Veterans" will be removed from the title of the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families—the title will be renamed "Minister for Defence People and Families". We agree with the review's recommendation that that will provide clarity about the responsibility for co-ordinating veterans policy across Government. Indeed, although the MOD will

[Johnny Mercer]

continue to provide support—including on pensions and compensation, on transition from service for veterans and their families, and beyond transition on issues resulting from service—the change to the ministerial title further clarifies that the primary duty for co-ordinating veterans policy across Government sits with the Office for Veterans' Affairs, at the heart of Government in the Cabinet Office, and with me as the Minister for Veterans' Affairs reporting directly to the Prime Minister in Cabinet.

Thirdly, I can announce that the OVA is currently exploring options for transforming Veterans' Gateway, which has already had more than one million visits to its online guides. The House will be pleased to know that we have recently launched a refresh project for the gateway, and are in the process of bringing the service into central Government, within the Office for Veterans' Affairs, ensuring that the gateway delivers streamlined access to the plethora of support available to veterans. Tied into that work, the Ministry of Defence and the Office for Veterans' Affairs will jointly assess the relationship between Veterans' Gateway and Veterans UK helplines. We will be mindful throughout of the need to simplify how veterans access support, and ensure that veterans who are unable to access services online, or who have more complex needs, are still supported.

Finally, the welfare services review will, alongside the Veterans and Advisory Pensions Committees Act 2023, contribute to clarifying the future role of the VAPCs in a way that supports the Government's vision for veterans' welfare services. Today puts us yet another step closer to delivering on this Government's ambition to make the UK the best country in the world to be a veteran. I pay particular tribute to the review team, the independent veterans adviser, and all 150 contributors to this review, for the considerable amount of work that went into producing the report in a relatively short space of time. I look forward to publishing the Government's full response to the review later in the year, and to ensuring that our welfare services for veterans and their families, service leavers and the bereaved community, are as efficient and effective as possible.

This country has an unwavering duty to those who put their life on the line for our freedom. As today's statement demonstrates, this Government are committed and determined to discharge that duty with the honour and respect that our courageous ex-service personnel deserve, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.46 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. Labour is deeply proud of our veterans, and for the enormous contribution they have made and continue to make to our country.

There was not very much in that statement, but what there is I can welcome. There seem to be two bits of rebranding, and two things that the Minister should already be doing, and that seems to be about it. I was expecting the Minister to have published the full Government response to the independent review of UK Government welfare services for veterans, instead of a statement that is just designed to look busy. When can

we expect that Government response? It is due by the end of the year, but we are already in late November so there is not much time left.

As we head into the winter months, the Conservatives are still failing to deliver the support that our veterans and their families deserve. This review is long overdue, but Ministers have been responsible for worsening veterans' services over the past 13 years. They have created a postcode lottery for veteran support, they have cut employment support for veterans, and they have continued to make little progress in the slow roll-out of veterans' ID cards. As temperatures drop, the cost of living crisis is going to be tough on families across the country, and our veterans are no exception. People are worried about how they can afford to pay bills, and many could be making that horrific choice between heating and eating, as many did last year and the year before. This is why it is essential that they are able to access the services and support they need here and now.

The veterans' welfare system can feel "almost impenetrable" for those seeking support. It is "overwhelming and off-putting" leading to a

"distrust of the Ministry of Defence and Veterans UK".

Those are not my words; they are the damning conclusions of the independent review.

Our veterans do not need empty promises. They need action. As there was not much in today's statement, we are left with more questions than answers—and here are some more. When will the Government design and articulate a single strategy for veterans' welfare services, and will that be inclusive of family members and the bereaved? What steps are being taken to prepare personnel throughout their entire military career for civilian life, not just as they come into the transition timeframe? Will the MOD commission a review of tri-service welfare support provision, with a particular focus on transition and the wider discharge welfare provision processes?

Paragraph 4.7 of the independent review states that casework management in veterans welfare services is not fit for purpose due to

"a significant (and out-dated) reliance on paper records",

and a lack of interoperability with other MOD IT systems. I therefore welcome the introduction of the £40 million digitisation programme that has previously been announced, but will the Minister tell us what proportion of that is being spent on veterans' welfare services and in what timeframe? Will that end the outdated reliance on paper records that was made clear in the independent review?

Paragraph 4.18 of the review says that welfare managers are "over-stretched", and paragraph 4.19 says that they are

"fundamentally...not professionally trained to undertake these roles",

which are part financial adviser, part trauma caseworker, and part social worker, which is

"in stark contrast to...the charity sector"

and has contributed to

"a high turnover of staff in recent years".

What is the Minister doing to address the training needs and capacity shortages?

It was disappointing that the content-light King's Speech contained no new legislation to put the armed forces covenant on to the statute book. Labour has

been clear that in government we would fully incorporate the armed forces covenant into law. Why does the Minister not agree with us on that? Why does he oppose that Labour policy?

We all understand that veterans' identity cards will speed up access to services, but throughout the last year the Minister has used various language, which has changed, about when he will hit the targets for delivering them. This time last year, he promised that by summer 2023 all veterans should have received a veterans' ID card. In April, he moved the goalposts, saying that it would be completed

"by the end of the year".

Now, as we approach the end of the year, he is claiming that he is delivering on the promise, but not every veteran has an ID card. When will they?

Labour is deeply proud of our veterans. They deserve better than Ministers repeatedly breaking promises, moving the goalposts and failing to deliver the welfare support that our former service personnel and their families deserve. The next Labour Government will stand side by side with veterans and their families, because we are a party committed to fulfilling the important promises our society makes to those who serve. The Conservatives like to talk up their support to veterans, but it is clear—very much like today's statement—that although there are a lot of words, there is not always a lot of substance.

Johnny Mercer: I will be brief, because I am afraid that whenever the hon. Member rises to talk about veterans, he simply demonstrates his vast lack of knowledge in veterans' affairs. He asked me questions that he knows, or he should know, are questions not for me but for the Ministry of Defence. For example, how we prepare people when they are in service is nothing to do with veterans' affairs and veterans' services. If he wants to stand up in the House and say that veterans' services have got worse over the last two, three, five or seven years, that is fine, but everybody listening and watching knows that he is simply trying to make a political point and play politics with veterans. I will not waste the House's time by going into too many of his points.

I have been consistent on veterans' ID cards. I ask him to look at this and write to me with a time when I ever said that every veteran would have their ID card by the summer of this year. That never happened, and it is important that in this House we do not say things—inadvertently—that may not be correct. We are delivering ID cards by the end of the year, which was always the promise. By January, we will be printing 10,000 a month, and the veterans I speak to are happy with the process.

The hon. Member asked plenty of questions that do not relate to the statement or this area. Again, I implore the Opposition to move away from glib statements about veterans. They need to intellectually apply themselves to how policy can change to improve the lives of veterans. There is a desert on the Opposition Benches, and that is deeply disappointing.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. He will recall that last year the all-party parliamentary group on veterans did a survey on Veterans UK, and I hope that survey played a small part in the statement. What is his vision for what comes after Veterans UK?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work that he has championed over many years in the APPG, along with all its members. He has specifically focused on Veterans UK. The ambition is to make it far clearer and easier to navigate and understand the functions of Veterans UK, and simultaneously to improve outcomes. The quinquennial review into armed forces compensation, which will report by the end of the year, tied into the full response to the veterans' welfare review and will go into detail about some of those issues.

I would like to put on the record my sincere thanks to all the staff who work at Veterans UK. I will always rally hard in their defence, because I have been there myself and seen how hard they work. They genuinely care and they are committed, but the resource envelope that they operate in has not been good enough for a long time. The Government have changed that, and I am proud of that, as it will change what it means to be a veteran in the UK.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the Minister for the statement, but he cannot escape from the fact that this is quite thin gruel. It amounts to a rebranding exercise, and I cannot think of many veterans who will be excited about what he said.

There is a cost of living crisis, and what veterans want to hear from the Minister for Veterans' Affairs is what he is doing, or what lobbying he is undertaking, to have practical steps put in place to help them right now. Nothing was said about that, despite that being a matter most pressing for so many veterans who are finding it hard to secure the dignity in retirement to which they should have a right.

The Minister said that veterans must be given the recognition they deserve because they have put their lives on the line on our behalf. He also said that he wants to simplify welfare provision for veterans, yet we continue to see too many veterans struggling to pay for essentials. I am sure he will say that that is not a matter directly for him, but I am keen to hear what lobbying he is undertaking—with his Cabinet colleagues and the Prime Minister, to whom he reports directly—on their behalf. This goes to the heart of veterans' welfare, which is surely his business.

In the 2021 census, 1 million UK veterans were aged over 65, and an estimated 146,000 were eligible for pension credit, but, by treating military compensation awards as income, some of our poorest veterans and their families are pushed beyond the pension credit threshold and missing out on thousands of pounds of support that other civilians can access. Of course, that extends beyond national support and includes benefits paid out by councils such as housing benefit, council tax support, discretionary housing payments and disabled facilities grants.

When I raised that in the Chamber yesterday, the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families told me that compensation is calculated with an understanding of how it will interact with welfare benefits. I must tell the Minister that the MOD has not said that before, and that has not been understood heretofore by the British Legion. Perhaps he could explain why

[Patricia Gibson]

compensation incurred as a result of service in the line of duty is not included in mean-tested benefits for civil servants but is for veterans. Will he support—

Johnny Mercer: I get the gist of the question. When it comes to issues that affect the veteran community and what is going on in that space, these are not just ideas that come from Ministers or others sitting around and thinking, “What is the most important thing for veterans?” Cost of living support is one of them, and that is why a number of funds are available. The Royal British Legion has done a terrific job on that over the winter, and the Office for Veterans’ Affairs leans into the armed forces covenant trust fund money as well. Consistently, the No. 1 issue in veterans’ affairs over the last seven years has been the identification of military service among the service charities. That is why between the Ministry of Defence and the OVA we have put so much effort and resource into delivering on our promises on veterans’ ID cards.

The hon. Member raises a legitimate point about the Royal British Legion’s current campaign on separating allocations of income for armed forces compensation scheme awards or similar. We will look at what can be done on that, and we are meeting representatives of the Royal British Legion—I think before Christmas—to work out what is the art of the possible. But I am afraid that I do not agree with her assertion that life is a misery as a veteran in this country. Things have improved exponentially in the last seven to 10 years. Never have opportunities or the support available been like they are now, but we continue to work hard. I always listen to the veterans community and work hard to ensure that we meet that need.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): From his maiden speech onwards, the Minister has relentlessly promoted the cause of service veterans, and the whole House should be grateful to him for it. Even longer in their service are tremendously experienced charities such as Veterans Aid in Victoria, under the inspirational leadership of Dr Hugh Milroy. To what extent is Government strategy drawing on the vast experience of such organisations, which know so much about the frontline issues faced by veterans who fall on hard times or even into destitution?

Johnny Mercer: I pay huge tribute to the charities in this space. I know the work of Veterans Aid, and Hugh does a terrific job down there. The key in all this work is collaboration. Nobody will deliver this by themselves. The expertise in the charity sector is unrivalled. In Op Courage, we have delivered a dedicated mental health care pathway for veterans, which is commissioned centrally but delivered by different charitable partners all over the United Kingdom. It works for the Government, because we know that the services are happening; it works for individuals, because they know that a service is available for them; and it works for the vital charities in the sector, which can have longer-term contracts. We are doing that on homelessness: Op Fortitude has set up a network of wraparound service provision to end homelessness this Christmas. I know that there is always more to do, and I would love to see Veterans Aid and to catch up with where it is with its work.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The Minister has recently been shown evidence that blood testing was carried out on servicemen in the ’50s and ’60s—testing that the MOD denied existed. His response was to say that he could not do anything and that the nuclear veterans should sue the MOD. To dismiss those veterans in that way is a dereliction of his duty as Veterans Minister, is it not?

Johnny Mercer: I recognise the politicisation of the campaign on nuclear test veterans. The truth is that no one has done more than those on the Government Benches to deliver that medal, more than 70 years later, to our veterans who served.

There is no cover up; I have worked extensively with the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families to uncover records in this space. Some records were taken, some were not. There is no cover-up policy to discriminate against that cohort. It simply does not exist. What would be the reason to cover it up rather than look after these people? I have travelled halfway round the world to Fiji to meet them, to look after them, to give them their medals and to try to support them. I rally against the politicisation of this veterans cohort, who will of course continue to drive down this space. We all have a responsibility to act maturely and to ensure that they receive the answers they deserve after a very long time.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s statement. Last year, I ran my first half marathon to raise money for Forces in the Community, a Broxtowe charity that supports veterans through all walks of life. Such small organisations do life-changing work and desperately need our support. Will the Minister lay out what support is in place for small organisations such as Forces in the Community?

Johnny Mercer: Of course. The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust is fantastic in that regard. It is an independent body that receives at least £10 million a year from the Government to support vital charities and what they are doing. The charity space is made up of large and small charities, and they are all equally important. They save lives and work on the frontline every day. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his fundraising, and to all colleagues across the House who support veterans charities, which are a vital part of delivering this nation’s commitment to our armed forces veterans.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I am sure that we are united in this House in wanting to secure the best outcome for veterans. An important part of that is remembering their service and ensuring that we never forget the sacrifices that they made on behalf of our country. I am conscious that the Minister is sitting next to the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families, who knows a little more about commemoration, but he will also know that we are very privileged to still have some veterans from Operation Overlord and Operation Market Garden. On behalf of the Government, will he say what work is under way to ensure that there will be a fitting 80th anniversary tribute to them next year?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to the relentless way that the hon. Member provides a voice to veterans in his community and across the country. Next year is an incredibly important year. While we contemporise

remembrance, as we did this year in the way we changed the parade and such things, we are incredibly privileged to have people still with us who experienced a conflict that none of us could ever imagine. They are a living and breathing example. The Government are determined to honour that in the correct fashion next year. I look forward to sharing those plans with him in due course.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I had cause to raise problems with the UK's handling of some Stroud veterans, particularly those with complex cases, and I thank the Minister for his time in that regard. I can see what an extremely difficult but necessary step the fearless Minister has taken in relation to VUK in his quest to help veterans. Will he talk through the transition period towards the new services, particularly to reassure anybody who is already involved with VUK, and expand on the Veterans' Gateway timeline and approach?

Johnny Mercer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for championing these issues over many years. Retiring the brand of Vets UK may seem like a small thing to people who do not know much about veterans. In the veterans community, it is a massive moment to retire that brand and look at what the organisation does in relation to the Office for Veterans' Affairs. We need to make sure that it does what it says on the tin for our bereaved families and delivers an improved service through the maturity of these reviews, which will be delivered by the end of the year.

Veterans' Gateway was a fantastic idea when it came in, and it has been run very well by the Royal British Legion over many years, but I have always had an ambition for it to do more. I have a vision of everything being in the palm of your hand in future, so people can go somewhere like Veterans' Gateway to access support, submit an armed forces compensation scheme application or geolocate support services in the community. It is an exciting vision and we can only do that by bringing it back into Government. It is now back in Government. We are working on those plans, and I will have more to say on that development in due course.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Veterans and their families are twice as likely to be unpaid carers or in receipt of sickness or disability benefits. Some of the announcements being trailed ahead of tomorrow's autumn statement have indicated that benefits might see a real-terms cut. It has been suggested the benefits might be increased by 4.6% rather than 6.7% to reflect the October inflation figure rather than the usual September one. Has the Minister discussed with Department for Work and Pensions or Treasury colleagues how the trailed changes might affect veterans and their families?

Johnny Mercer: I have not, and I will not comment on anything to do with tomorrow's autumn statement.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend and his work on behalf of veterans across the whole United Kingdom. He takes very seriously the impact on their families, particularly those who have lost loved ones fighting for their country. A lot of good work has been done by the Ministry of Defence and the UK Government on the war widow's pension issue, but I have been contacted by constituents who are concerned that things have changed somewhat

since the original announcement in May, and a significant proportion of the fewer than 400 women may not get the money they were expecting from the UK Government. Will he agree to take that back to the Department to look again?

Johnny Mercer: I work closely with my Ministry of Defence colleagues on that. I started working in 2017 and 2018, and then in 2019 as a Minister, on some sort of recognition of war widows. I am pleased with the work of the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families and with the ex-gratia payment we have ended up with. That will never replace a pension and it does not value what has been lost on behalf of the nation, but it is designed to recognise that. The Government are clear that that should be available to everyone who is entitled to it, and I will work with my Ministry of Defence colleagues to address the points that my hon. Friend raised.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is estimated that some 60,000 ex-service personnel are victims of frozen pension arrangements because they have chosen to live abroad. Whatever the Government's position on frozen pensions generally, surely these people could and should be treated as a special case. Given the Minister's responsibility for co-ordinating veterans policy across Government, does he agree that they are a special case and will he represent their concerns across Government?

Johnny Mercer: This is an incredibly difficult issue, with which I am familiar. I have just been on a visit to Australia, where it was raised with me in person. The truth is that this is a Treasury policy area. I recognise that individuals who leave the country want to see their pensions uprated. That is not current policy, but I will always advocate for veterans to be a special case. I continue to make those representations every day that I am in government.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I agree with the Minister that these issues really should not be politicised. I came into the House nearly 20 years ago. I grew up in an Army city, Hereford, and I now represent a constituency in Shropshire. When I came in 20 years ago, there was a lot less provision for veterans in every single aspect of what the Minister outlined today. I commend the fact that the Government are supporting the majority of the 35 strategic and operational recommendations in the review. I put on record my thanks to all the staff and volunteers at the Royal British Legion-backed Battle Back Centre for wounded veterans in Lilleshall in my constituency. May I take this opportunity to say that he has an open invitation to visit?

Johnny Mercer: That is very kind. I try to get around as many such centres as possible. The RBL has done an incredible job over many years with a lot of Battle Back Centres. My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I became a Member of Parliament after my experiences in conflict in 2006, 2008, 2009 and 2010. I am here now in 2023 and veterans' care has been transformed, whichever way we look at it. On dedicated pathways for mental health and physical health, ending homelessness, the criminal justice system and sector initiatives into employment, there has never been a better time to be a veteran.

[Johnny Mercer]

However, we continue to press hard, because we want to make this the best country in the world to be a veteran. I am absolutely determined that we will get there.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Simply rebranding Veterans UK seems like a superficial move. I am not clear how just changing the name recognises the deep problems that exist in that set-up. What assurances can the Minister give the House and the many veterans who contact me regularly that there will be a root-and-branch review to ensure that existing complaints are dealt with and that veterans receive the service they richly deserve?

Johnny Mercer: I am just looking over my statement again and at no stage have I said that this is a rebranding exercise. The Veterans UK brand is being retired, absolutely, but that is not a rebranding exercise, because then we would have come forward with something else that would be exactly the same. The overarching organisation is being removed, as well as the interrelationships under that between the bereavement services, the compensation services and the welfare services that operate out of Norcross. Look, if people want to take it as a rebrand, that's fine. I have not said that and that is not what it is going to mean for veterans, but if it fits their narrative, that's fine by me.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I welcome the statement, but not as much as I welcome my right hon. and gallant Friend's role and his enthusiasm to continue to undertake it. That role did not exist under previous Administrations. We all know there is nothing worse than seeing a veteran on the street begging. Recently, I came across a man called Danny at Edgware Road tube station and he was indeed begging. I wrote to the Minister with Danny's contact details and I am eternally grateful that Danny is now getting the support he deserves, but I do not believe that he should have had to beg for that. I look forward to the Government's response to the review to ensure that it does not take a Member of Parliament to write to a Minister in the Cabinet Office to get the support that people not only deserve but require.

Johnny Mercer: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for bringing that case to us. I also pay tribute to those in my private office who work on individual cases like that for veterans every single day and change lives. That is what has happened in Danny's case.

I do not want to see any veteran sleeping rough because of a lack of provision. Under this Government, we will end that by this Christmas through Op Fortitude, a dedicated pathway out of homelessness, with 910 supported housing placements and £8.5 million. We are incredibly proud of it.

On the point about this position not existing before, I welcome any political debate around veterans. There is a new shadow Minister talking about veterans today; the other one is not here any more. There is no commitment to follow through on what we have done with the Office for Veterans' Affairs. I have no idea why the Labour party would want to seek a fight on veterans' affairs. We just want the country to look after them and I think Labour needs to have another look at that tactic.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Let me say on behalf of the people right across Chesterfield that we have an absolute respect for the role played by veterans. I know that people across my constituency want veterans to get the support they need. We have an organisation in Derbyshire, Stand To, which does fantastic work in providing veterans' support services. I will be writing to that organisation following this statement. I was expecting to be writing to say that the Government were now in a position to provide their response to the review. From what the Minister has been able to say today, he seems keen to make the point that this not just a rebranding exercise; Veterans UK is being stood down, but there will be a replacement. Can he say any more about what will actually replace it, so I can put that in the letter that I am writing to Stand To?

Johnny Mercer: What I try to do in this space is set the objectives. We all know the problems around Veterans UK: the lack of accountability, and the challenges the staff face through the lack of resourcing and the lack of digitisation. We have set out where we want better outcomes, for example in the compensation space. We have set those objectives and what it comes back with we will implement. It will all be tied into the Veterans' Gateway.

We have an ambition that no one comes in through the wrong front door, does not have to tell their story a number of times, and receives the care and compensation they deserve for their service, but that is a journey and not something I can implement overnight. I know colleagues know this, but it is clear from having conversations with anybody in the veterans space about Veterans UK that it is not where I want it to be. That is what today is about: acknowledging those challenges and understanding why they exist. That has nothing to do with the staff, who have worked incredibly hard over many years but have been traditionally under-resourced by Governments of all colours. They now have a new resource envelope and a real opportunity to deliver professional veterans care, which is what this is all about.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his ongoing work to support veterans right across the United Kingdom. The Minister will be aware that new research from Queen's University Belfast has found that Northern Ireland veterans who have been exposed to traumatic events and experienced barriers to care have increased levels of PTSD symptoms and diagnosis. What further assurances can the Minister give me that the needs of veterans who served in Northern Ireland will be supported, given those findings? I am led to believe that the Minister will be visiting Northern Ireland. He would be most welcome in my constituency to visit some of those veterans in the not too distant future.

Johnny Mercer: I thank the hon. Lady for her continued advocacy in this space. As everybody knows, levelling up what it means to be a veteran in Northern Ireland has been absolutely critical to the Government's work, whether through the very, very difficult legacy Bill or the Northern Ireland Veterans Support Office. The NIVSO is the first directly funded workstream of £500,000 coming out of the Office for Veterans' Affairs, which we are working with the Veterans Commissioner over there to deliver. There are key areas in the veterans' ecosystem

that are delivered by devolved authorities and we respect that. All we are asking is that all veterans get the standard they deserve and I am determined we will get there in Northern Ireland. I am going to Northern Ireland again on 4 and 5 December. I look forward to seeing her and everyone else who is always very kind to me when I come over.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the update. I wonder if he would listen to this voice from the desert from east Durham. Can I draw his attention to the terrific work the East Durham Veterans Trust does to provide mental health support, counselling and advice? It is a much neglected area. Indeed, the Minister's colleague who is no longer in her place, the hon. Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie), mentioned the Veterans' Gateway. There is some excellent work on a telephone-based app that I have seen, which was pioneered by the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. I hope we will see a lot more of that. May I draw the Minister's attention to early-day motion 51 in support of a veterans' bank holiday? Will he look into that suggestion? In this country we are way behind in the number of bank holidays. I think it would be significant for the whole country to highlight veterans' welfare through a new bank holiday.

Johnny Mercer: You will not find me arguing against more time off, Mr Deputy Speaker! I am always fighting for better services in the veterans space, and I will take that idea of a veterans bank holiday away with me.

When it comes to the issue of mental health, the hon. Gentleman is entirely right. Some small groups have done extraordinary work on the frontline over many years, sitting with veterans throughout the night when no one else is awake or watching, and plugging them into services. We have transformed mental health care services through Op Courage, spending between £22 million and £24 million a year, and there were 19,000 referrals in its first year. There is still a massive amount of unmet

need, but we are determined to drive that down so that all these groups feel connected and plugged into services. It is my mission to ensure that no veteran, especially when poorly, does not know where to turn, and I will not rest until we get there.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's statement. His understanding of veterans' issues has been nurtured by his service in the Army but also by his nature, which leads him to try to help people who are less well off, and I appreciate that very much. I understand that just in the past week his Department has been able to assist people on whose behalf I have been acting for some time, and I thank him for that as well.

Last month it was announced that the Office for Veterans' Affairs would be providing about half a million pounds of pilot funding to level up medical and welfare services for veterans in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister confirm that all those veterans—every one of them—will qualify for the funding, and that there is no criterion relating to length of service that they will have to meet in order to gain access to the right care?

Johnny Mercer: There is no criterion of that kind. The qualification in this country for being a veteran is 24 hours' service. We can disagree on whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, but it is the basis of the allocation and all the data that we have had to collect over the last few years to understand what the veterans cohort is actually like. I am not sure what sort of exclusions the hon. Gentleman is referring to—he may wish to speak to me offline—but I have rallied hard against the way in which the politics changes in these things. Individuals' commitment to the nation is unwavering. There is a standard to which we will adhere when it comes to looking after them following their service, irrespective of where they served in the United Kingdom, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for helping us to deliver that over the years.

Points of Order

2.17 pm

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During Justice questions, I sought to ask a question about the comments reported to have been made recently by a district judge in Walsall magistrates court. While I do not wish to question the authority of Mr Speaker, it is my understanding that the judge in question was not one of those covered by the categories described in paragraph 21.23 of “Erskine May”. Can you advise me, therefore, on how I can receive a reply to my question?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. Mr Speaker has, I understand, reviewed the question and is content for it to be answered.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Laura Farris): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for his perfectly proper question, and I want to reassure him that we have listened to it and the Lord Chancellor will be writing to him in due course.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has recently been announced that owing to its perilous financial position, Derbyshire County Council has asked the Department for Transport to pause its plans for the Staveley regeneration route bypass. That would mean that £140 million of Government money would not be available to us in Chesterfield for a much needed bypass because of the financial problems of Derbyshire County Council. Obviously the decision was not made by the Department for Transport, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I wonder whether you have been notified of any plans for a statement to be made in the House about the proposed change. If not, how we can ensure that the council and the Department work together to ensure that this important route still goes ahead?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is fully aware that that is not a matter for the Chair, but I can say that I have received no indication of any statement to be made this afternoon. The hon. Gentleman’s point is a matter of record, it has been heard, and it will be for those on the Front Bench to decide whether and how they wish to respond.

Media Bill

Second Reading

[Relevant documents: Fifth Report of the Welsh Affairs Committee of Session 2022–23, Broadcasting in Wales, HC 620, Twelfth Report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee of Session 2022–23, Draft Media Bill: Radio Measures, HC 1287; Thirteenth Report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee of Session 2022–23, Draft Media Bill: Final Report, HC 1807; and the Government response to both reports, HC 155.]

2.24 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): I beg to move, That the Bill be read a Second time. I am especially pleased to do so today, as it is World Television Day.

The British media are world renowned. They inform and educate, they challenge and entertain. Content created by our media, be it journalistic exclusives or broadcasting endeavours, attracts domestic and international audiences and helps to drive our creative economy. However, the world in which this content is competing is changing rapidly. Technology has transformed every facet of our lives, and nowhere is that more evident than in the way we watch and consume television and listen to the radio. We have seen the rise of streaming giants and on-demand content, YouTube and smartphones, tablets and TikTok, and all those have combined to reshape our whole broadcasting landscape. Today, that landscape is unrecognisable in the context of what followed the last major reform of the rules that governed broadcasting in 2003.

We need to support the British media to enable them to compete and continue to serve their audiences with high-quality content. We need regulations fit for the digital age, and that is what this Media Bill will give us. In keeping with the Government’s defining mission, the Bill makes long-term decisions for a brighter future for our viewers, our listeners and our public service broadcasters. It is a pro-growth Bill that is designed to level the playing field for public service broadcasters such as the BBC, Channel 4, STV and ITV, among others, so that they can continue to provide first-class content and reach their audiences. As Members will know, we have engaged heavily with all parts of industry, from the streamers to the independent production sector and our public service broadcasters, to get the Bill right, and if we want our broadcasters to be ready for the next wave of technology, it is imperative that we get it right.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): As the Minister says, the Bill marks a time of huge change in broadcasting and what have you, but the specific concern in Scotland, especially in my part of the world, is that while it mentions and makes provision for S4C, Gaelic broadcasting seems to have been omitted from it. I am sure that that is just an oversight, and that during the Bill’s later stages we will see safeguards in place for Gaelic broadcasting and BBC Alba in particular.

Lucy Frazer: I recognise the great contribution made by Gaelic speakers. We have agreed that we will, in the first instance, bring together the BBC and Scottish Government officials to discuss the co-ordination of funding decisions for Gaelic language production between

the two organisations. We considered funding arrangements for minority language broadcasting, including programming for the Gaelic language, at the previous charter review, and those arrangements will be considered again at the next review.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I am sure the Minister will acknowledge the immense importance of public sector broadcasting to the Welsh language. How will she ensure that the Bill reflects the significant challenges faced by S4C in providing a wide range of good-quality programmes for both linear TV and online consumption, and protects the viability of the Welsh medium sector?

Lucy Frazer: We are of course anxious to protect S4C. As it is a public service broadcaster, many of these provisions apply to S4C, which we strongly support.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for giving way; she is being very generous with her time.

In recognising the importance of public service broadcasting to outstanding broadcasting UK-wide but particularly in Wales, we should also recognise that this is not just about Welsh language programmes; it is also about English language programmes produced in Wales. Is my right and learned hon. Friend not saying—entirely correctly—that the Bill is not about protecting public service broadcasters, but about allowing them to compete on a level playing field in doing what they do best?

Lucy Frazer: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point, because this Bill is all about protecting our public service broadcasters, whether that is the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 or S4C, and I am proud to be bringing it forward.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): On the point about public service broadcasting, does my right hon. and learned Friend recognise the growing importance of local television and how the Bill could be improved by making sure that local television coverage is dealt with as a public service broadcaster? It is getting as important as local radio stations such as Swindon 105.5 in my constituency—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Say that again!

Sir Robert Buckland: Swindon 105.5—I recommend you all listen to it, and BBC Wiltshire, of course. It is important that we recognise local television as a public service broadcaster, and an amendment could be made to the Bill in that regard.

Lucy Frazer: I am always happy to discuss matters with my right hon. and learned Friend. This provision will help to protect radio more broadly through the smart speaker provision and there are other measures on protecting. The Government understand the issue of online local news, which is very important, and Ofcom has concluded proposals in relation to its role, but there are always matters we can look at further.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What is contained in this Bill to address the concern that, in the digital age, the BBC licence fee is simply unsustainable?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend will know that this is a matter that the Government are considering—that is, the question of the licence fee. We have already started looking at the issue that faces the BBC in a changing media landscape. People consume their media in a different way. Last year, 400,000 people did not renew their licence. This is something we are looking at, but it is not a question for this Bill.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, Channel 4 is based in Leeds and I thank her for her decision that it should be retained as a public service broadcaster in the public sector. The Media Bill is an opportunity to legislate for new public service broadcasting purposes for media literacy and workforce diversity. They are not currently in the Bill, but is the Secretary of State considering those two issues in relation to the Bill?

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Member will know, we are bringing forward the matters in this Bill, but he is right to state the importance of Channel 4. We have brought forward measures to ensure that it retains its ability to be sustainable while also protecting independent producers.

I was talking earlier about how it was important to engage to get this Bill right. We have engaged heavily and are very grateful to the wide number of people who have helped to ensure that the Bill has the appropriate scrutiny and has landed in the right place. I would like to put on record my thanks to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage). The Committee invested heavily in the Bill and I am grateful for its recommendations. I want to thank it for its constructive engagement with my Department and for its pre-legislative scrutiny earlier this year. Alongside views from the industry, its reports have played a crucial role in ensuring that the Bill delivers for audiences and listeners.

But it is not just the Select Committee that has called for this Bill. The Welsh Affairs Committee, led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), and the Scottish Affairs Committee have both called for its introduction. I would like to thank Baroness Stowell of Beeston for her leadership of the Communications and Digital Committee, which also called for this Bill's introduction and worked hard on the issues in it for a number of years. I would like to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for Aylesbury (Rob Butler), for East Devon (Simon Jupp) and for Warrington South (Andy Carter) for their thoughtful and considered engagement. I would also like to thank the previous iteration of the shadow Front Bench for its support, and I am sure that this shadow Front Bench will also provide constructive engagement.

It is not just films that are central to our creative industries and our national life. We are in a golden age for the silver screen in the UK, and public service broadcasters are the main reason why. Whether it is reality TV shows such as “The Great British Bake-off” and “I’m a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!”, or dramas such as “Time”, “Broadchurch” and “The Night Manager”, our public service broadcasters have proven that they can continue to go toe to toe with the streaming giants, but it is clear that this Bill is needed to enable our

[Lucy Frazer]

world-leading broadcasters to compete in an ever-more online world. Measures in the Bill will introduce simpler, more up-to-date rules on what our public service broadcasters have to broadcast and how they reach viewers, making sure that the high-quality public service content for our audiences remains easy to find as viewer habits evolve.

For a renowned public service broadcaster such as Channel 4, this Bill will help to support its long-term sustainability. This includes removing its publisher broadcaster restriction, which will free up Channel 4 to make more of its own content if it wants to, and open new options for diversifying its revenue away from advertising. Alongside this, we are bringing forward measures to safeguard Channel 4's significant role in driving investment into the production sector. As many Members will recall, I set out the core aspects of this package, which the Government have designed in consultation with Channel 4 and the independent production sector, in a written statement to this House on 8 November.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I heard the right hon. and learned Lady's previous answer and I am sure that it came from a good place, but just to be absolutely sure—what we are looking for in Scotland are provisions similar to those for S4C, and if they could be bolted on as things progress, that would be gratefully welcomed. One final point I would make is that Gaelic broadcasting has enjoyed tremendous cross-party support in Scotland, pre-devolution and post-devolution, and I think she should bear that in mind. It is probably the same in Wales with S4C, so hopefully we will get the same provisions as S4C.

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. He will be aware that Alba is not in the same position as S4C because it is a programmer rather than a channel. In that way, it has a relationship with the BBC, and that is how its funding arrangement is determined.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP) *rose*—

Lucy Frazer: I am going to make some progress.

I was talking about Channel 4, but it is not just Channel 4 that is going to benefit from this Bill. The Bill includes measures specific to S4C, the Welsh language broadcaster. We worked closely with S4C on the provisions in the Bill, which will enable S4C to broaden its reach and offer its content on new platforms in the UK and beyond. The Bill also updates S4C's public service remit to include digital and online services, and implements in statute other recommendations made in the independent Williams review in 2018. These provisions are a crucial part of the Government's support for regional and minority language broadcasting. We know how important this kind of broadcasting is, giving many people content in a language familiar to them and providing a cultural outlet for communities across the UK. It was no surprise that, in its recent report on broadcasting in Wales, the Welsh Affairs Committee called on the Government to introduce a media Bill to Parliament as early as possible in the next Session, and I am glad that we have been able to deliver on that commitment.

It is clear that online demand streaming services are now an important part of the broadcasting landscape. From Netflix to iPlayer, they provide huge value to UK audiences and in many cases make significant and growing contributions to the UK economy. While UK audiences enjoy having instant access to the programmes they love, it is also essential that when they watch them on their smart TVs, they enjoy similar protections to live TV.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): As a member of the Welsh Affairs Committee, I would also welcome assurances that our Welsh media broadcasting, S4C, is safeguarded under the Media Bill, but more specifically, can the Secretary of State confirm that the listed events regime will accurately reflect the importance placed by supporters on key competitions including the Six Nations rugby to ensure their status on terrestrial TV?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Member will know that sport is devolved in Scotland, and if the Welsh Government want to make any recommendations to us in relation to listed events, of course we would be very happy to listen to them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Lucy Frazer: I will make a little progress.

The Bill will provide greater protections for children and vulnerable audiences through a proportionate new on-demand video code, to be drafted and enforced by Ofcom, bringing streaming services in line with the protections that already exist for the audiences of public service broadcasters.

The Bill will also require greater provision of subtitles, audio description and sign language. This will lead to a much improved service for millions of people living with a hearing loss or visual impairment when they watch or listen to television programmes on demand.

Chloe Smith (Norwich North) (Con): I draw the House's attention to an expected future interest on this point that I articulated in Westminster Hall.

I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work she has done to ensure that accessibility is accommodated in this Bill, and particularly for responding to the previous work she did with me and others on subtitling and other accessibility points.

Lucy Frazer: I was pleased to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss these important points, and I am very proud that this Bill will ensure greater access so that those with impairments can enjoy the things that those of us without impairments already enjoy.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the Scottish Affairs Committee, of which I am a member. She will know that, in our report on public broadcasting, we recommended that the Government provide urgent assurances on maintaining Freeview beyond 2034. That chimes very much with her speech to the Royal Television Society, in which she said:

“We want terrestrial television to remain accessible for the foreseeable future.”

Does she anticipate an opportunity in this Bill to ensure we have that guarantee beyond 2034?

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important point, because we want to ensure that everybody has access to television. That is why I made those comments in my speech. We are looking at this matter. There are a number of ongoing reviews to make sure we have evidence bases. I am happy to stay engaged with him on that subject.

From Wimbledon to the FIFA World cup final, live sports are among the most important fixtures on our television schedules every week. To protect British viewers' access to major sporting events, the Bill will modernise the listed events regime. In line with the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's recommendation, we have acted to close the streaming loophole.

Millions of us tune into the radio every single day to spend time with our favourite presenters or our favourite music. Whether it is Cambridge 105 Radio or LBC, we rely on local radio to keep us entertained and informed. Few know more about this issue than my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South, and I thank him for his tireless work to champion this vital sector. But as modern technology continues to transform how, when and where people tune in, we must ensure that stations across the UK have the right support in place so that they can reach their listeners.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I am grateful for the Secretary of State's kind words. One of the issues we have discussed and debated in this Chamber over the last 12 months is the BBC's decision to reduce local news on many of its local radio stations. I am very supportive of this Bill and welcome the steps to cut red tape for local commercial radio, but can she assure me and this House that there are sufficient provisions to ensure that local news continues on local multiplexes?

Lucy Frazer: I was pleased to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and to take part in a session on his local radio station. As he knows, the BBC is operationally and editorially independent but, of course, local news is important. We have measures in this Bill to protect local news.

Because listeners increasingly listen to radio using smart speakers, the Bill will require that major smart speakers ensure that the UK radio stations that listeners love remain available on request. The Bill will also remove a number of outdated and burdensome regulations that are holding back the commercial radio sector, while strengthening protections for local news and information.

Finally, one of my central priorities as Secretary of State is to protect media freedom so that our world-leading media can continue to thrive. The Bill has media freedom at its core. One of its most significant measures is the removal of a long-standing threat to that freedom by repealing section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. Section 40 and the possibility of publishers having to pay the legal costs of the people who sue them, even if they win, has hung over our media like a sword of Damocles. The Bill removes the sword for good.

The Labour party, of course, is no friend of the free press. The shadow Secretary of State has, in the past, called for boycotts of some of this country's most well-respected papers. The Labour party has accused the Government of muddying the waters of this crucial

legislation by including the repeal of section 40, but for us the water is clear. The position is clear: we will protect our free press.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): At Justice questions earlier today, the Government were again lauding anti-SLAPP legislation that protects small publishers and investigative journalists from oppressive conduct by wealthy individuals and organisations. That is exactly what section 40 does, and the Minister has completely mischaracterised it. Is it not inconsistency, amounting to hypocrisy, to repeal that provision?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is very knowledgeable on this point, and I am always grateful for his interventions. I am proud that, together with the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), I have brought forward provisions to strengthen the anti-SLAPP regime via a taskforce. The Ministry of Justice has proposed further legislation and the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), who is extremely knowledgeable, will know that currently it applies only to economic crime. Section 40 applies across the board, and SLAPPs are strategic lawsuits of a particular client, so repealing section 40 is necessary. I am proud to be bringing forward that repeal in this Bill.

I am sure that today we will hear significant contributions on this important Bill, and I look forward to the debate. We should be under no illusions about the urgent need to press ahead with reforms. Success today is never a guarantee of success tomorrow, and it is our job, as a Government and as a House, to enact reforms that keep our broadcasters at the top of their game in the years ahead. That is what the Bill will do: levelling the playing field, removing threats to the media's sustainability, and opening up opportunities for them to maximise their potential and unlock growth. I commend this Bill to the House.

2.48 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, I welcome the introduction of this important and long-overdue Bill. I start by making her an offer: I will work with her on a cross-party basis to get the Bill into law as quickly as possible, subject to the proper scrutiny that would be expected from His Majesty's Opposition. Britain's public service broadcasters must be fully equipped with the tools they need to thrive in this intensified era of internet and on-demand television. That is why Labour has been calling on the Government for some time to bring forward many of the measures in the Bill. And it is not just Labour; Ofcom, Select Committees of both Houses, the public service broadcasters, consumers and industry leaders across the sector all back the Bill and want to see it passed into law, and some have done so for many years.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Further to the point I made to the Secretary of state, and further to the shadow Minister's excellent point about working co-operatively across the House, would she support a straightforward amendment to protect Gaelic language broadcasting? I hope the Government will do so too.

Thangam Debbonaire: I cannot say whether I would support an amendment until I have seen it, but despite a specific mention of "Gaelic-language content" in the

[Thangam Debbonaire]

briefing note on the King's Speech, there seems to be no mention of protecting Gaelic language broadcasting in the Bill, which gives me cause for concern.

I am sure that the Secretary of State understands how frustrating the delay has been to everyone involved and how, unfortunately, it seems to our public service broadcasters, the creative industries and all the talented people who work in them that the Government do not care about them. Much of the delay was down to the pointless war on Channel 4: were the Government going to sell it off and did they think it was publicly funded? Nadine Dorries, their 10th Culture Secretary in 13 years, certainly seemed to think so, which slowed down the Bill.

Not content with chipping away for more than a decade at our remarkably resilient British creative industries, they attempted to take their Tory wrecking ball straight to one of our finest institutions, costing Channel 4 and other PSBs time that they could have used to get on the stronger footing with their international competitors that the Secretary of State has described today. If only the Bill had come sooner.

Selling off Channel 4 was never going to work. It was wrong for viewers and it has only done damage to our creative industries. The Government should not have been contemplating it in the first place. With all that time wasted, looking inwards and wrangling with themselves, they held our public service broadcasters back. The resulting delay to the Bill and all the consequences of that have to sit squarely with the Government. Never again must our PSBs be treated with such disdain.

It may seem like a non sequitur, but the Culture, Media and Sport Committee undertook incredibly thoughtful pre-legislative scrutiny. I am sure the Secretary of State will agree that the Committee's work added considerably to the quality of the legislation across the piece.

PSBs are important to the wider creative economy because they stimulate growth, create quality jobs and nurture British talent across all our nations and regions, so I welcome the measures in the Bill to boost that success further, particularly those ensuring that PSBs are always carried and given prominence on smart TVs, set-top boxes and streaming sticks. There is still debate about whether "appropriate" prominence, as it is described in the Bill, goes far enough. Would "significant prominence" avoid confusion? As we set the framework and as the Bill moves to Committee, we have to explore what being clear about the mandate to Ofcom actually means.

For many people, the most important part of the Bill is the recognition that PSBs bring us joy and their unique universality brings tens of millions of us together, whether to cheer on the Lionesses, watch Elton at Glastonbury or mourn the late Queen. At a time where loneliness is at an all-time peak, public service content keeps us connected. It is a string threaded through homes in every city, town and village in this country. I welcome the important modernisations to the listed events regime in the Bill—there is a lot to welcome in the Bill—including closing the streamer loophole, so that TV-like services that provide live content via the internet, such as the World cup and Wimbledon, will be brought within scope in the listed events legislation.

However, unfortunately the Government have not taken on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's recommendation to include digital on-demand rights in the regime, so on-demand highlights and online clips can be kept behind paywalls. I know the Government are conducting a review on digital rights, but the deadline for responses to their consultation was last year. I urge the Secretary of State to look down the back of the Culture, Media and Sport sofa—I am very fond of sofa metaphors, I am afraid, so hon. Members may hear more about sofas later—pull that review out and tell us what is in it? If the results of the consultation are not ready in time to be included in the Bill, will the Government include an enabling provision to allow digital rights to be added later?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Some of the points raised, including those about digital rights, are made by Colin Browne of the Voice of the Listener and Viewer. I recommend that the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State meet him to understand what other points he is concerned about, so they can be addressed during the passage of the Bill?

Thangam Debbonaire: The Father of the House is quite right to draw attention to the Voice of the Listener and Viewer—I believe that organisation is on my call list, so I will chase that up following his kind and sensible suggestion.

Another broad area that I ask the Secretary of State to look at again is children and young people's television, which has been one of public service broadcasting's biggest contributions to the life of our country. I am sure we can all name our favourite programmes, which might reveal the age of hon. Members. For me, they are "Jackanory", "Grange Hill" and "The Magic Roundabout", but for others they might be "Byker Grove" and "The Story of Tracy Beaker", tackling issues rarely seen elsewhere in the media. Colleagues are welcome to mention their own favourite TV programmes.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: "The Wombles".

Thangam Debbonaire: Interesting. The hon. Gentleman obviously appreciates the importance of tidying up.

Sadly, I fear that the importance of children's TV has been lost in the Bill. There has been a dramatic shift in the viewing habits of young people, particularly children over the age of 7, as increasingly parents no longer control viewing. Coupled with the long-term reduction in commissioning of original UK content for children, I am concerned that the Bill does not go far enough.

The Government must ensure that the next generation does not miss out on the high-quality, culturally relevant storytelling, such as "The Wombles", for which our generations are so thankful to our public service broadcasters. I think I will develop a Wombles theme now. These programmes have a powerful influence on a child's development. They provide role models—I am sure the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) is an assiduous tidier up as a result of what he watched as a child—inspire ambition and encourage social inclusion. They engage participation in national conversations and develop a child's understanding, valuing and ownership of what it means to be British.

Children's TV also makes a significant contribution to the economy and provides quality jobs. It is a key part of our soft power too, promoting tolerance, logic and fair play to children all over the world. The Government must consider the wider consequences for public service broadcasters if children are not consuming as much content as they used to. It is unhelpful for the long-term interests of our public service broadcasters if a generation has little experience of their content. Will the Secretary of State think carefully about how she can work with public service broadcasters to get more quality UK-made children's content and, crucially, make sure it is as accessible as possible to them?

The Bill is designed to allow current public service broadcasters to fulfil their obligations by taking into account their online delivery platforms, but children also spend a massive proportion of their time on Disney+ or on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. I urge the Secretary of State to speak with those platforms about how they can provide more quality public service content produced here in the UK.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): There seems to be an excessive amount of advertising on commercial programmes aimed at young children, to the extent that it sometimes seems almost subliminal within the programme. Does my hon. Friend think that area needs to be looked at, because those programmes are using children as a commercial pressure on their parents or guardians?

Thangam Debbonaire: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of work done by the Children's Media Foundation and I am pleased to note his point. A great concern of mine is that all children's television and broadcasting ought to be of the highest possible quality. In our country we have that tradition of making great children's TV.

I am also concerned about the talent pipeline that PSBs rely on. For the past 13 years, successive Tory Governments have failed to understand the importance of creative education for economic growth and jobs. We get announcements with no follow-up, which means they have not taken the issue at all seriously. Government adverts patronised creatives, suggesting that ballerinas should retrain in cyber.

Complementing the aims of the Bill, Labour will back the next generation of creative talent that we know our PSBs need if they are to fulfil the promise offered by the Bill. We will equip the workforce with the skills, knowledge and understanding needed to sustain PSBs and the wider creative industries, which are so necessary to fulfil the pipeline. There will be a broad and balanced education for every child, who will have access to high-quality arts, culture and creativity under a future Labour Government.

I recognise the unique and vital role of the independent sector, as set out in the Bill. As MP for Bristol West, the home of BBC Wildlife, some Channel 4 studios and many creative industries that supply and work for them, I know how important PSBs are, or can be, for driving inward investment into communities across our country. I have seen for myself in my patch how that can stimulate the supply chain and the resilience of the local economy, but I want more for this industry across the country from this Government.

Finally, I welcome the measures in the Bill to give S4C, the Welsh language broadcaster, more flexibility in the modern world, and I welcome the comments that my hon. Friends have made about that.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for giving way and congratulate her on her appointment. The point that I would like to make to the Secretary of State is that, although there is a broad welcome in Wales for the reforms to S4C, it is a channel that seems at the moment to be at a crisis point; perhaps that is going too far—it seems to be in an element of turmoil. I would be very grateful if the Secretary of State would look at what is going on at S4C, starting with the journalism of Martin Shipton on Nation.Cymru, because there are a few issues that need to be addressed.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, although I think it was probably addressed to the Secretary of State. I agree with him on the importance of S4C, as I am sure we all do. I want S4C to have more flexibility in the modern world, but I did note, as has been raised by other colleagues, that there is no specific mention of protecting Gaelic broadcasting in the future. That is despite an explicit mention of it in the King's Speech, so I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could clarify what has changed by the next stage of the Bill.

I thank the Secretary of State for bringing forward the measures in the Bill and urge her to listen to the comments that I have raised today, and those that my colleagues and others across the House will raise, because there is a great deal of cross-party consensus. We all want the Bill to be as good as it possibly can be. I reiterate my offer to work with her to get the Bill through Parliament in the best shape possible and to do so as smoothly as possible. Labour will back this Bill to back our public service broadcasters.

3.1 pm

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I echo the sentiment of others. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire). In continuing with the spirit of non-partisanship that she expressed, I, too, hope that the Bill will get through the House quickly and think that we should congratulate the Secretary of State on getting this far. As she said, it is 20 years since we last had a significant media Bill of this size. Most of the big names that we think of in the media now, apart from the public service broadcasters, would not have meant anything or, indeed, did not exist at the time. I suspect that when the 2003 Act was being prepared, the biggest disruptor around was Blockbuster Video—[*Interruption.*] I can see a few memories being sparked across the House. That was the case then; companies come and go, but the importance of the sector continues.

This Bill is so important and timely for two reasons. The first is the economic importance of the creative sector; the creative industries are one of the Chancellor's five important growth sectors—and rightly so, as they contribute something like £108 billion to the economy and support something like 2 million jobs. They are an extremely important part of the British economy and also help to spread British soft power around the world.

[*Damian Green*]

Those institutions that provide great creative content are some of the things that people around the world most admire about this country.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): When I was last in the United States, before the pandemic, I was astounded by how many people asked me if I had heard of “The Crown” or “Downton Abbey”. If that was not an example of the soft power that our creative industries give this country, then I know of no better.

Damian Green: The hon. Gentleman is of course quite right, with the slight caveat that of course “The Crown” is made by Netflix—one of the global disruptors that produce great work that we watch, but also give rise to the necessity to protect our own British public service broadcasters.

Arguably even more important than the economic importance of our public service broadcasters is their cultural importance; in a global world—where, indeed, people can take British stories but produce them in a global context—we need a British voice or a collection of voices. At a time when our society is riven with divisions, we need activities and means of expression that remind us all of what we share, so the media, which both create and carry those illustrations of our shared experiences, are more important than ever. The protections in the Bill are important not just for our economy, but for the flourishing of our culture, and I can think of few more important things that a Government can address.

Stephen Crabb: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point about British soft power and projecting British culture on the world stage. Does he agree that, within that, there is also huge scope for projecting the variety of what modern Britain looks like? Does he agree that, whether it is through programmes on Disney+ like “Welcome to Wrexham” or through the Welsh public service broadcasters, projecting Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish identities as part of that overall industry is an incredibly important thing in the 21st century?

Damian Green: Partly as a fellow Welsh man, I completely agree with my right hon. Friend that it is about the subtlety of British culture. There is one recognisable British culture, but within that there are many streams of different cultures, and preserving each is extremely important—not just by itself but also to preserve the whole British culture. Precisely because we have not just one public service broadcaster—it is not just the BBC, but people from ITV, Channel 4, S4C and Channel 5 doing great work—we get the ability to project diversity of voices within the wider British voice. That is extremely important.

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving way. I had hoped that there would be consensus right across the House on epistle he is giving on the importance of the Gaelic language, and that an amendment to make sure that the Gaelic language is protected should be supported across the House. If I may say so, there is a Gaelic TV station, BBC Alba Radio nan Gàidheal

—in contrast to what was perhaps said from the Dispatch Box. It is important that we have that parity of esteem and that we can consider the funding that is necessary to allow the station to flourish.

Damian Green: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. As that matter is not in the Bill, I have not considered it very carefully. If I may say so, I thought that it was an expression of wisdom on the part of the shadow Secretary of State when she made the point that she could not commit to supporting an amendment that she had not seen. I think that is a good rule for everyone.

I wish to concentrate briefly on five areas covered by the Bill, the first of which is indeed Channel 4. It is what is not here that I celebrate as much as what is, because the Secretary of State took an early and wise decision not to proceed with a wholesale privatisation of Channel 4. I always thought that that policy was based on two pillars that were mutually incompatible; there was an argument that Channel 4 had no commercial future and was not viable, and a separate argument that it could be sold off and raise a huge sum of money for the Treasury. It seemed to me that we could make a plausible argument for either of those propositions, but it was really impossible to make a plausible argument for both those propositions at the same time, and that seemed to be what the Government were seeking to do for a time.

I wholeheartedly congratulate the Secretary of State on moving on from that policy and finding new ways to make Channel 4 viable in the long term, because that is extremely important. The way that the Government have chosen to do that is to remove the publisher-broadcaster restriction to allow Channel 4 to start making some of its own content. I merely observe at this stage that I hope that that will be done very cautiously, because among the virtues of Channel 4 is not just what it broadcasts, but the fact that it has promoted the growth of an enormous sector of production companies—some very small and some that have grown to be very large—and it is that ecosystem that has allowed much the successful creativity in recent decades, for more than 40 years.

I should declare an interest, because I was working for “Channel 4 News” the day the station started. I was there from day one. I suspect that, particularly given that the early reception of “Channel 4 News” was—how shall I put it?—not wholly positive, if somebody had told us then that the programme would still be on air at the same time every night as it was in 1982 when the station started, we would all have dropped down dead with shock. Nevertheless, it is still there and it is still controversial, and many other excellent things have been produced by the channel.

That has allowed other production companies to flourish, so I hope that, as Channel 4 moves cautiously towards producing some of its own programmes, it recognises, and the regulator and the Government recognise, that preserving that ecosystem of independent companies is hugely important. Channel 4 says that its move into in-house TV production will be gradual and will build on the existing diversity in the market; I very much hope that it observes that and that there is not too much conflict between proceeding cautiously with that and maintaining the channel’s overall viability.

The second detail in the Bill that I would like to deal with is preserving the prominence of public broadcasters on the new platforms that people use to watch TV. I welcome the measures in the Bill, but with some caveats. It is obviously important to ensure that UK users can easily find the public service content they value; despite the increasingly diverse global marketplace that we have discussed, about seven in 10 UK adults want UK life and culture represented on screen, and that is the core purpose of the public service broadcasters.

If I may pick up on the many gratifying favourable references to the CMS Committee, on which I serve under the enlightened chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinéage), we have suggested that PSBs should be given “significant”, not just “appropriate”, prominence on all platforms. We think that that will be a better way to protect the long-term interest of the PSBs, and it can be done by introducing amendments to proposed new section 362AM of the Communications Act 2003 on the Ofcom code of practice, so it is not a complicated thing to do.

Another detailed point I would make is that the Bill creates a level playing field in the must-carry/must-offer section for commercial PSBs in their negotiations with the programmers about how they will be carried, but not for the BBC. An amendment to that part of the Bill covering the must-carry obligations, setting out that a regulated platform should act consistently with the equivalent BBC charter and framework agreement provisions, would address that small point.

The next point I will concentrate on is listed events, and here I echo some of the remarks made earlier in the debate: it is very welcome that the loophole about streaming services has been closed. That will be a significant step forward in the way people watch big sporting events in particular, but again I commend to Ministers a recommendation of the Select Committee that the Government should go further and include digital on-demand rights as well, because that is how many people will watch big sporting events—something that brings the country together—in future. With the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, which were obviously in a different time zone, some digital on-demand clips and highlights reached 10 times more people than the live TV coverage where an event had seen some British success overnight in this country.

If we look ahead to future great sporting events, the men’s football World cup is in the USA, Mexico and Canada, and the 2028 and 2032 Olympics are in the USA and Australia respectively. Those are all inconvenient time zones for most British viewers, so extending the regime to on-demand rights would make a lot of difference to a lot of viewers.

I echo the point made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), the former Lord Chancellor, about local TV. Those channels provide valuable services and I think they could be included in the licensed public service channel definition in the Bill. Allowing some guaranteed prominence for local TV services in the new TV ecology would help to ensure sustainability for that sector, which is increasingly important.

My final point is about radio. I am a lifelong fan of radio, and I am impressed and surprised by how the medium is flourishing in this area of infinite choice, particularly when it comes to music listening. For years, people have thought that the existence of services such

as Spotify would kill off radio, but the opposite seems to be happening: there is more radio listening than ever. That is a tribute to all those in the radio sector, both BBC and commercial services, who have done an incredible job of preserving new generations of listeners.

As another word of congratulation to Ministers, I am delighted that, after some doubt, part 6 on the radio sector has been included in the Bill, because there are some very important protections that are needed. As online listening grows, radio stations are becoming increasingly reliant on global technology platforms that produce smart speakers to reach their listeners. It is important, at this stage in the development of radio, that we stop platforms’ potential abuse of their market position by charging for access to UK radio services or inserting their own adverts in commercial radio services, so those protections are very welcome.

Stephen Crabb: On that point about the growth of the radio sector, does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the real success stories of recent years is the emergence of a new generation of digital community stations to plug the gap of the local commercial stations that have become part of national groups and lost some of their local rootedness? Does he further agree that Ofcom should look at releasing more FM licences so that those new digital community stations can grow, especially in areas such as mine in west Wales, where take-up of digital radio is perhaps lower than elsewhere?

Damian Green: I do, because in an era when the biggest media have become completely global, what we used to call hyper-localism is important in all media. Radio Ashford in my constituency does what it says on the tin—it is very local. It is strictly about the town and it competes with the BBC’s offering on Radio Kent, which is broader and, like all BBC local radio, for a large part of the day is regional rather than even county-based. The capacity to have properly local services is very important.

If I may suggest a way in which those welcome protections could be strengthened even further, Ministers should consider expanding them to include online-only radio content such as podcasts and catch-up radio content, and indeed the systems in vehicles—that is where a significant proportion of radio listening takes place—which are not protected in the Bill as it stands.

Ian Blackford: It is important in that context that we give consideration to the community radio stations that broadcast on FM—I have a number in my constituency, including Skye FM, Two Lochs Radio, Nevis Radio—which are very often hand to mouth. It is important that Government agencies conducting advertising through local radio stations remember the importance of those community stations and their high level of reach. They need to be given their fair share in that regard.

Damian Green: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who makes a powerful point.

To conclude, the Bill is welcome. Many of the individual measures are welcome and necessary. Some could and should be improved, and I am sure that they will be as the Bill is scrutinised in its various stages. Overall, I am delighted that the Bill is now before the House, and I wish it, and the Ministers carrying it through, well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesperson.

3.20 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate having the opportunity to lead for the SNP on Second Reading. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), who usually leads on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, has been unable to come along, so I have stepped into the breach, as it were, and agreed to manage the Media Bill for the SNP.

Although the Bill is welcome and takes a number of positive steps forward, I am concerned about how over-complicated some of it is. The Bill amends the Communications Act 2003, the Broadcasting Act 1996 and the Broadcasting Act 1990. Apart from amendments to corporation Acts and tax Acts, I have not seen anything quite this complicated. If I were a broadcaster or worked in this area, I would find it difficult to find all the information I needed even to comply with the legislation because of its complicated nature. The Media Bill mostly amends those three pieces of legislation, as well as a few others in smaller technical ways—smaller technical amendments are absolutely standard—but it has been done in a complicated way that will make it difficult to find some of the definitions.

I was looking, for example, for the definition of “programme”. I was directed to the Communications Act 2003, which directed me to the Broadcasting Act 1990, which then told me what the definition was. I have yet to find out the definition of “person”. Perhaps the Minister could furnish me with information on where I could find that definition in those three pieces of legislation. I did, however, find out that when it comes to choosing programmes and organising programming, an algorithm can be counted as a “person” if someone is assisted by an algorithm. I would find it very helpful if the Minister pointed me in the direction of the definition of “person”, which is used a significant number of times in the Bill when it talks about a person who is in charge of programming. Does the word “person” also relate to an entity or a group of people if they are in charge of programming? It would be helpful to have more information on that.

I am slightly concerned about other definitions and uses of words. The requirement for Ofcom to work out that there is a sufficiency of something without there being any clarity on what “sufficiency” means is slightly concerning, because something that I see as sufficient may not be seen as sufficient by somebody else. If there were more information on what “sufficient” meant, there would be more clarity on the changes to Channel 4 as a proportion of expenditure, for example, as opposed to a proportion of programming. “Sufficiency” is not sufficiently defined in the Bill.

The shadow Secretary of State mentioned the word “appropriate” in respect of the availability of public sector broadcasters through internet services, and raised concerns about whether it should be re-termed as “significant”. That would probably give those broadcasters the level of prominence that we expect and want them to have, so that people can access their services in the way that they want and expect. I agree that there could be a different way of doing that.

I will come to a number of different issues, but let me touch on the requirement on the prominence of services. That is important, and I am glad that the Government have chosen to tackle the prominence of services. The order in which public service broadcasters appear—particularly for those who use Amazon Fire Sticks, for example—is important. As those broadcasters have responsibilities that other broadcasters do not, it is important that they are given a level of primacy.

However, I am concerned that the App Store and the Google Play Store are not included in the measures, given the way in which such organisations—particularly the App Store—have behaved. They have said, “We can carry things such as the BBC iPlayer or the STV player only if you give us a significant slice of your revenue.” That is not acceptable. If people look up the BBC iPlayer on the App Store, it should be the top result, rather than being placed further down because Apple has had an argument with the BBC about it. It is inappropriate for Apple to charge the BBC significant amounts of money for a level of prominence that the BBC should have by right as a public service broadcaster. That is important not just in relation to the software in the Fire Stick, for example—or however we choose to view our video-on-demand services—but in the prominence that public service broadcaster apps, such as Channel 4 on demand and BBC iPlayer, are given. The same applies to BBC Sounds in radio access. Those broadcasters should not be charged significant amounts for that prominence.

While I am on radio, I appreciate what has been said about ensuring that Alexa and Siri provide the correct radio station. I would really like Alexa or Siri to play Taylor Swift when I ask for her, rather than Rage Against the Machine. It is not that they are trying to provide me with something else; it is that they do not understand my Scottish accent. Improving the listening ability of those services so that they can play the song that I want would be incredibly helpful.

I like the provisions on advertising. In some cases, it is not Alexa or Siri making decisions on advertising; it is TuneIn Radio—or whichever programme Alexa or Siri is playing through—that is making those decisions. As long as that provision applies to how we hear advertising, rather than who deals with the background stuff, I am happy enough with the measures.

I agree with the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), who has just headed out of the Chamber, on the importance of local radio. In my constituency, Station House Media Unit—known as shmu—does local magazines as well as a significant amount of local radio. It feels really rooted in our communities in a way that, as the right hon. Member said, larger stations that have been taken over by other companies do not.

I appreciate the level of children’s content we have had, particularly on the BBC, having watched CBeebies with my children. When I was younger, I went to a fancy dress party dressed as a Tweenie. I cannot remember whether I was Bella, Milo, Fizz or Jake, but I can tell the House that I did not have to look up those names, because I remembered them. They are ingrained in my soul, having watched the show with my little sisters. They are significantly younger than me, which is why I mention such a recent television programme.

Ofcom has had to scale up massively to service the provisions of the Online Safety Act 2023. I am appreciative of that, and I have a lot of time for the growth in capacity and the number of excellent people it has brought in to do the work. Can the Minister give us a level of reassurance that, for the policing of this area, the writing of the regulations and guidance that this Bill will require and the different interactions that Ofcom will be having, in particular with video-on-demand services, it will have the number of individuals and capacity and resource to be able to undertake such additional layers of work? I am aware that Ofcom is doing significant portions of work around broadcasting already, but I do not want it to have to stretch itself when it is already having to grow at pace. I am concerned that there are not even the number of qualified individuals to take on that work, given how specialised and important it is. Can the Minister reassure me that he is having conversations at least with Ofcom about its capacity when this legislation comes in?

A number of my colleagues have mentioned the Gaelic language and the issues around it. Of course, those could all be solved by devolving broadcasting to the Scottish Government, but in lieu of that, I will highlight some of the disparities. The Secretary of State was perhaps getting a little confused between BBC Alba and MG Alba, which are two different organisations. *[Interruption.]* Alba—my pronunciation is nearly there. I am an east-coaster. The two organisations are different and operate differently. We appreciate the support being given to S4C, which is a good thing, but we have a disparity, as £89 million of licence fee is going to S4C, whereas only £10 million is going to the Gaelic language. There is a requirement for a quota of at least 10 hours a week of Welsh language programming, but no requirement for a similar quota for Gaelic programming. I am concerned by that.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member is making a very good point about the Gaelic language. I absolutely hate to say this in this place, but my constituency has a few native Gaelic speakers—there are so few of them. I pray that in a few years' time another generation will have the language. Gaelic is in a vulnerable situation, which reinforces her point.

Kirsty Blackman: I very much appreciate the hon. Member's point. I went to visit a Gaelic nursery in Aberdeen a couple of years ago. Staff there were concerned about the reduction in Gaelic programming for children, because outside the nursery the children were not necessarily getting the exposure to Gaelic that they might have had if they had lived in Skye or the Western Isles. They were concerned that, just because they had chosen not to live in those communities, the language embedded in those children and their ability to access TV programmes in their native first language was significantly reduced. I am concerned by the disparity. I hope the Minister appreciates that we are coming from a good place in trying to ensure the protection of Gaelic, some level of parity and that people across Scotland can access it.

I will highlight specifically what the Bill states. It states that there has to be

“a sufficient quantity of audiovisual content that is in, or mainly in, a recognised regional or minority language”.

Later, the Bill states that

“‘recognised regional or minority language’ means Welsh, the Gaelic language as spoken in Scotland, Irish, Scots, Ulster Scots or Cornish.”

The Bill does not define what “a sufficient quantity” is. It does not say whether it will be measured on the basis of the percentage of people who speak that language in each of the countries. That wording is concerning, and given that there is a quota for Welsh programming, it is disappointing that there is not a similarly recognised quota for any of the other languages.

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is making some strong points, and all of us on the SNP Benches support full funding for S4C, but it is specifically worth saying that there is no index-linking of the funding available for MG Alba. In many respects, the situation that Gaelic broadcasting is now facing is even worse than people might consider, because in real terms the funding available for MG Alba will, by 2027, be 50% of what it was in 2008. We are facing an existential threat to the survival of Gaelic broadcasting. We can think about the breadth and depth of the programming. I have programme-making in Skye, including from Chris Young of Young Films, who is known for “The Inbetweeners”. He, for example, produced the excellent “Bannan”. We need to fund such broadcasting appropriately.

Kirsty Blackman: I agree. We do not regret or feel angry at the Welsh language programming that is provided and the support for it. As my right hon. Friend said, we are looking for parity, and the index-linking of funding is important. We also need to recognise that the Scottish Government are already providing significant funding for the Gaelic language and to MG Alba, but there is no parity in terms of the licence fee.

I have a few other things I wish to say. Sadly, the Bill finally says goodbye to teletext; it is the end of teletext as we know it. It has not been in use since 2009, but the Bill finally removes it from legislation.

I also wish to talk about football games and how broadcasting and listing works. Listing is the particular concern. The Secretary of State said that the listing system is being revamped—I am not sure exactly what word she used but that was the direction she intended. However, the listing system itself—the way in which category A and category B listings are chosen—is not being revamped. No change is being made to that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) is unwell and unable to take part in today's debate, but he has done a huge amount of work on trying to ensure that we can access Scottish football games. It is incredibly important that we can see Scottish football games in Scotland. The Broadcasting Act 1996 says:

“‘national interest’ includes interest within England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.”

It does not say, “England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland”; it says “or Northern Ireland”. Given how popular Scotland's football team is in Scotland, its games should be classed of national importance, especially as we have finally made it to the finals of a tournament. That is wonderful and we want to be able to see those games. It is not fair that viewers in Scotland have to pay to see their national team play, whereas viewers everywhere else in the UK do not have to pay for the same privilege. This issue is important. I note the point that the shadow

[Kirsty Blackman]

Secretary of State made about the Culture, Media and Sport Committee's digital rights enabling provision, and I agree that if enabling provisions could be made on digital rights for sports events, that would be an important move.

I have a couple more issues to raise. The first is on-demand services and the inclusion of the 30-day requirement. Unfortunately, the Bill does not make it clear whether that means 30 consecutive days. It is important that the word "consecutive" be added unless precedent in other legislation suggests that "30 days" means 30 consecutive days. Why is news excluded from that provision? The right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) spoke about the economic and cultural importance of our media, but we must consider its democratic importance in ensuring that knowledge is spread. I do not understand why the Minister and the Secretary of State have chosen to exclude news from this 30-day requirement on digital provision. The other thing that could have been clearer is ensuring that some of the provision is accessible. I know that the BBC has worked hard on this, but we are not there yet, as some of the local news that is provided is nearly impossible to find. If I want to watch Aberdeen-specific news, or even Scotland-specific news, it is hard to find it and disentangle it from more national news. Accessibility is required in that regard.

This legislation provides for quite a lot of delegated powers. I have not managed to make my way through all of them, but using the affirmative procedure often strikes the right balance. Using the draft affirmative procedure for a significant amount of the delegated powers in this Bill is important.

I am pleased that we have the Bill. I am concerned about the lack of futureproofing in some of it and about the overcomplication, as some of the definitions are difficult to follow and therefore may not achieve what the Government intend. The cultural sector is incredibly important to the entirety of the UK. It is incredibly important in Scotland, and we certainly will not oppose the Media Bill as it goes forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

3.39 pm

Dame Caroline Dinéage (Gosport) (Con): I am delighted to speak in this debate, not least because although the Government have been committed to a media Bill for a long time, it has always been with that well-worn caveat, "when parliamentary time allows". I am really grateful to both the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for their kind words about the work of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. I am pleased that one of our first recommendations to be adopted by the Government was to include the Bill in this Session, and I am even more delighted that it has been introduced so quickly following the King's Speech.

So much has changed since the last piece of major media legislation was passed 20 years ago, in the days when broadcasters decided when their programmes could be watched, TV was almost entirely analogue and only

about 4% of the country had any form of access to the internet. But not everything has changed. Public service broadcasters remain at the heart of the UK's media ecosystem, providing content that enriches our culture, our society and our democracy, and radio remains resilient, despite the environment in which it operates changing beyond recognition. It falls to us to pass legislation that both recognises the immense way in which technology and audience behaviour has changed and preserves the future of our valued PSBs and radio stations for years to come.

I am really pleased to see that the Government have accepted the majority of our Committee's recommendations following our hard work on the Bill. The changes make the Bill more effective, closing the loophole that allows an unregulated streaming service to buy the rights for a listed sporting event and then stick it behind a pay wall. They make it more workable, improving the drafting of how the must-offer and must-carry carriage deals between PSBs and platforms should be negotiated. They make the Bill more proportionate, exempting news and sport from the requirement for on-demand content to be available for 30 days if it is to count towards a PSB's remit. They make it more futureproofed, ensuring that the definition of an internet radio service can be amended to reflect changing audience habits or use of technology, and they make the Bill clearer, by ensuring that Channel 4's sustainability duty is compatible with its existing statutory obligations.

There remain a few areas where the Bill will benefit from further discussion as it progresses, and I would like to pick up on a few of those today. The first is the issue of genres, which some Members have talked about. Ensuring prominence for our public service broadcasters is central to the Bill, but it is the obligation on them to provide high-quality and diverse programming that enables us to make the argument for prominence so incontrovertibly.

The changes to the public service broadcasting remit are significant. Other than news and current affairs, the Bill will remove the genres in the Communications Act 2003—for example, religious and arts programming, or children's programming; I will not be drawn into the trap of discussing my favourite, because my dad may well be watching the debate—and replace them with an obligation to provide programming that reflects the lives and concerns of the UK's different communities and cultural interests and traditions. That simplifies the remit of PSBs and the enforcement of it for Ofcom, but at what cost?

In our inquiry, the Committee found that these changes have received far less attention than other aspects of the Bill. Funnily enough, it was something that the PSBs themselves did not want to linger on in their evidence to us, but that is all the more reason why we need to consider whether these changes are the right ones. It is true that much of what people regard as public service content is now provided by a wide range of providers beyond PSBs and sometimes for free—for example, on Sky Arts—but not all genres are served in that way, and we need to be sure that the Bill gets the balance right.

With regard to prominence, obligations on our PSBs must be fairly balanced with the benefits that they are going to see. The harder it is to find public service broadcasting content, the less likely that content is to be watched, so PSBs need prominence on smart TVs and streaming sticks. That cannot come soon enough, but

those who followed our inquiry will know that there was a debate among stakeholders as to whether we keep the existing descriptor for electronic programming guides that PSBs' prominence should be "appropriate", or change it to "significant". That sounds like a really technical argument, but in the advanced user interfaces of today, what prominence looks like varies considerably from device to device and from platform to platform, so it is really important. What is considered appropriate prominence is far more open to interpretation than before, which is why we supported changing "appropriate" to "significant". That was one of the few recommendations we made that the Government did not accept. Ultimately, what really matters is ensuring that public service content is always carried and is always easy to find, so that is what we need to work through as the Bill progresses.

We also need to consider whether the Bill's "must carry" obligations on platforms need aligning with the "must offer" obligations in the BBC's charter and framework agreement. Are we aiming for a level playing field between platforms and all our PSBs, or only the commercial ones? The House needs to explore that question, as well as whether the Government should extend the new prominence regime to local TV services. Those services are given prominence on electronic programme guides, on either channel 7 or channel 8, but the Bill does not give them prominence on smart TVs. We need to decide whether that is the right direction.

There are also places where I would be grateful if our Ministers provided more detail. Our Committee recommended that the new video-on-demand code should apply to all platforms in the same way that the broadcasting code applies to all broadcasters. However, the Government intend to apply that code only to platforms with a large UK audience. I recognise the Government's argument that the legislation must be proportionate: clearly, applying the code to small, niche services such as a football team's on-demand service could unfairly and unnecessarily penalise them, with no overall audience protection. However, we need more indication from the Government of the types of services they have in mind. The Minister will probably say that no decision has been made, but Ministers will have already considered this issue as they developed the Bill and responded to the Select Committee's report, so I hope he will be able to say a bit more about what services he envisages being in scope.

We also need a bit more clarity on a late addition to the Bill: the introduction of a new special clause for multi-sport events that was not in the draft Bill. That clause would apply to four group A events: the summer Olympics and Paralympics and the winter Olympics and Paralympics. Currently, Ofcom consent is not required when there are genuine partnerships—that is, full and comprehensive rights on both sides of the partnership—but the Bill will change that, with each partner only entitled to "adequate live coverage". This morning, the Select Committee had a session on women's sport and met broadcasters, including the BBC's director of sport, Barbara Slater. She raised real concerns about the impact of that clause, especially without any detail of what "adequate" means. If we are to avoid PSB coverage of those listed events being undermined by the Bill, we need clarity. Why did Ministers add that clause? What is wrong with the current rules? We need to make sure that we protect those moments of national importance, and that the Bill does not lead to any unintended consequences.

Turning to radio, there are places where we could look again at what is covered by the legislation. As Members have already heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), on-demand content from licensed radio stations is not covered by the Bill, nor are any online-only stations, yet some 10 million adults listen to podcasts every week and some of our biggest broadcasters have online-only stations. We all know how incredibly important radio is—it is the most trusted medium in the UK—and, in particular, how important local radio is. More than anything, the public reaction to the BBC's changes to local radio brings that home. Sharing content across large areas risks undermining the sense of localness that has, until now, made BBC local radio really distinct. The measures to protect radio are some of the most important parts of the Bill, and we need to reflect on whether they go far enough.

Ultimately, of course, there is only one question to ask of any piece of media legislation: does it deliver for its audiences? First, the Bill is critical to the sustainability of our PSBs. While those broadcasters do not always get everything right, they provide huge value for audiences: they are the broadcasters who entertain us, who teach us, and who show us our national sporting triumphs—and, quite often, our defeats. Secondly, the Bill is critical if viewers are to be confident that all TV-like content, whether broadcast or on demand, will be subject to the same or similar standards. Thirdly, this Bill is critical to the future of radio, where stations are increasingly dependent on online platforms for access to listeners. This Bill seeks to ensure that radio remains the strong, trusted medium that it is today. Yes, there is more discussion to be had on the exact contents of the Bill, but it does deliver for audiences, which is why I am so pleased to hear that it has support from across the House and why I want to see it come into law as soon as possible.

3.49 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I want to start by expressing my party's broad support for this Bill, which is timely. What a change we have seen since 2003 when the Communications Act was passed: it is a massive change. The new legislation is crucial for public sector broadcasters, and I therefore believe that time is of the essence. However, I am treating this debate as a bit like a tutorial in which we will have an interesting exchange of ideas. On behalf of my party, I will reserve our opinions—in the light of certain reservations that I will express—and we shall be abstaining on the Bill tonight. That does not in any way indicate that we do not support the thrust of the Bill, and I think that needs to be understood.

The first concern I would air is the removal of some regulations about local broadcasting. We have heard from all around the Chamber the importance of local broadcasting, including what it means in platforming voices and stories from across the nations and regions, not least the highlands, where I come from. I think this is a good point at which to unreservedly add my support to my colleagues—one across the Minch, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil); another to the south of me, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford); and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman)—in saying that it is crucially important that we get it right

[*Jamie Stone*]

with regard to Gaelic. As I said in an intervention, it saddens me to say this, but the situation of the language is precarious and we need to do everything possible to secure its future.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that there should be some sort of legislative underpinning and support for Gaelic broadcasting. Indeed, BBC Alba has asked for that and pointed that out.

Jamie Stone: Yes, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct.

Furthermore, as we know, local radio—and, as was expressed by the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), who is no longer with us, the same is true of local television—is absolutely fundamental to the proper functioning of local democracy. I know this only too well, and in some ways I regret it. Let me give Members, for their lighter amusement, a cautionary tale. When I was first elected to be a member of Ross and Cromarty District Council a long time ago—I was once upon a time the youngest member of the council—my younger brother was a broadcaster on Moray Firth Radio, our local radio station, which is still alive and well today. He thought it would be kind to me to put me on his chat show on a Saturday morning called “The Chipboard Table” just days after I was first elected. He sat me down—this was live—and he said, “Jamie, last night we had a dram together, and you told me that you felt your fellow councillors were quite creative in the way they completed their expenses.” This led to an indifferent start to a career in local government, but that is one of the scars I bear. Luckily, it was a long time ago. For accountability and throwing a light on local democracy, local radio is absolutely crucial, and notwithstanding my experience, I would not have it any other way.

On the issue of quotas, the removal of Ofcom’s responsibility to monitor the delivery of content in education, science and culture may risk content in these areas declining. That would concern me because, as was eloquently expressed by the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), the soft power this country exerts is about being British, but it also about reflecting the different facets of our nation that English-speaking countries find absolutely fascinating. As the Bill progresses, I will be looking to ensure that Ofcom retains a statutory requirement to measure the output of each of these genres—language, culture or whatever—against, let us say for now, the benchmark of what we have at the moment. I do not wish to see any decline from that whatsoever.

On accessibility, when it comes to linear television, there is a requirement for 90% of programmes to be provided with subtitles, as we know. It is right that there should be greater access to those things. Let me give the House another personal example. On a Sunday evening, a cousin of mine who is a little older than me comes and has a meal with my wife and I, and she watches the television. She is a great friend and much loved. She is also pretty deaf, and for some television programmes we can get the subtitles up, but for others we cannot. Perhaps I am not very intelligent with IT, but by gosh we’ve tried, and it is hugely frustrating that she cannot see the words that are being said. The same applies to

people with visual impairment—we are talking about signing and other ways of helping. The Liberal Democrat party will look to require that at least 80% of on-demand TV content be subtitled, with 10% audio described and 5% signed. That is our position at this stage.

While I find it tricky to find the subtitles, another issue is also tricky to find. One of the most important aspects of the Bill is the call for public service broadcaster prominence, ensuring that the likes of BBC, Channel 4 and ITV are not only easy to find on any smart TV, but are also given due prominence. This is the existential issue for our public service broadcasters, and the question of how appropriate prominence will be defined is vital. The Liberal Democrats would like the current call for “appropriate” prominence be strengthened to “significant” prominence, and I believe we will be tabling amendments to see whether we can achieve that.

Kirsty Blackman: The hon. Member is talking about a range of different issues, which highlight the fact that there are a lot of disparate concerns about the Bill. Does he share my concern that the draft programme motion does not include taking oral evidence for the Bill, and does he understand why the Government have done that?

Jamie Stone: I believe that is a wise point, and we would be wise to heed it.

When it comes to Channel 4, I believe I am not alone in having concerns about plans to relax the publisher-broadcaster status, and about the potential risk that that poses to the unique contribution that the channel makes to the diversity and sustainability of the independent production sector across the nations and regions. Again, that takes me back to my earlier point about the sheer diversity of the product being part of our soft power, which is important to this country. However, there is a caveat. With the increased independent production quota and Channel 4’s prediction that any changes will take at least five years to launch, that fundamental change might not lead to any market shock in the short term. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and we shall see.

Finally, let me turn to what is perhaps a core debating point today. Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 requires new outlets to pay the costs—we know what that is all about. The Liberal Democrats stand firmly against that charge. The 2013 Bill followed the Leveson inquiry and the phone hacking scandal, and the proposed change will put at risk the balance between free speech and public safeguarding, all the while favouring news publishers. One could say that that is a standard political stance in this debate, and perhaps Conservative Members would take a different view. However, let us consider one final point, which is important in terms of the notion of British justice. This change would mean that anyone without substantial financial resources or deep pockets that can match the might of the newspapers would find it impossible to pursue legitimate grievances through the legal system. We need to think about that very deeply. What can the small man possibly do against the publishing giants? That is hugely important and I think there is a warning here. With that I will conclude my remarks. I sincerely hope that my career in this place will not include any more gaffes on live radio, but you can never tell, Madam Deputy Speaker, least of all from a highland Member of Parliament.

3.59 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): A number of hon. Members have mentioned how long it has been since the last major piece of media legislation, but it is worth reflecting on that period of change and what it means. When the Communications Act 2003 was passed more than 20 years ago, Amazon was a relatively small online retailer selling music, books and video games, Netflix delivered videos and DVDs by mail order for people to watch at home, and YouTube did not exist. If we had asked someone then what a smart device was, they would probably have guessed that it was a scientific calculator. There were no smart devices, and the iPhone was still some years away from existing.

The idea that every one of us would carry in our pockets a device allowing us to watch live television whenever we like would not have been envisaged, or people would have thought that to be far off. That is significant not just because technology changes the media landscape but because it has a massive impact on viewing habits. That in many ways is the real challenge faced by the public service broadcasters today. The Bill is a hugely welcome step towards addressing some of those needs, but there will continue to be an ongoing challenge.

All Ofcom data is clear that, with the exception of the pandemic period when everyone watched a lot more television, public service broadcasting is declining. The minutes people spend each day watching public service broadcasting are declining year on year. Broadcasters face ongoing pressure not just from that audience decline but from rising costs through inflation for television production, which are running much faster than the consumer prices index. That puts an inevitable squeeze on budgets.

Public broadcasters that have the luxury of making more of their own programmes while raising money through subscriptions and other things are better placed to deal with that audience change. Nevertheless, it is there. The biggest challenge that the BBC faces is not about it not making brilliant programmes, not having fantastic writers or not nurturing brilliant talent; it is that people are voluntarily declining to pay the licence fee simply because they feel their needs in gathering news or watching fantastic programming can be met elsewhere.

The challenge that Channel 4 has faced is that, without the ability to invest in programmes from which it can make money, it relies solely on advertiser revenue, and that revenue is under challenge all the time, so it is much harder for it to be sustainable and to plan for the future. I welcome the Government's introduction of measures in the Bill to change Channel 4's remit. I understand the concerns raised by companies in the independent production sector, but I think they would recognise that that sector is totally different from when Channel 4 launched. At that time, a lot more BBC and ITV production was done in-house and there were no other routes to television.

Channel 4 created an opportunity for independent production companies to launch businesses, make programmes and gain an audience that otherwise would not have existed. Now, there are huge opportunities for independent producers. While Channel 4 is an important part of that ecosystem, it is by no means the only one, so the best thing we can do for the independent sector is

ensure that Channel 4 is in as robust health as possible so that it can commission more, because 65% or 70% of a bigger TV company is worth a lot more than 100% of a very small one, or one that is struggling to continue to exist.

Those are the ongoing challenges that the PSBs will face, and the fight for attention will only continue. People now are more distracted not only by video-on-demand services but by video gaming and other forms of audio-visual entertainment. That is the backdrop against which the Bill is being introduced.

The question of the degree of PSB prominence on connected devices—modern televisions that are internet-connected and totally integrated with people's on-demand viewing habits—is incredibly important. Whether that level of prominence is “significant” or “appropriate” is an important debate. Is it enough simply to have the television schedule there on the device, with that schedule the live schedule ranked in order on the electronic programming guide as we are used to seeing it? How easy is that to find? Will people be constantly shifting through menus for on-demand services, be those Netflix, Amazon, Sky programming or whatever, before they find the television guide?

We see in Ofcom's yearly audience analysis data from its media nations report that those under the age of 40 do not really regard television as a live product any more, unless they are watching the news or live sport; it is an on-demand product. If we asked student audiences what they thought of the TV schedule, they would find the idea of going home, turning on a television, pressing the No. 3 button and watching live what had been preselected for them, in a selected order, completely anathema. Younger audiences do not expect television to be a live product. They do not expect to go to the television guide to find what they want. In fact, audience analysis shows that, increasingly, when people turn the television on, the first thing they do is turn to an on-demand service like Netflix to browse what is there—that is their primary act, rather than going to a channel.

Whether it is easy to find the schedule and see what is being shown will be key to the debate on prominence. Otherwise, the PSBs will continue to find it hard to have a share of voice and be noticed in an environment where people are increasingly distracted by what they want to see. That experience itself is fractured, as a consequence of the way that on-demand services are designed. They are tailored to the user, so everyone will see a different screen when they turn them on. When everyone turns to Netflix, they see something different. They even see different tiles advertising the same programmes, tailored based on their past viewing habits. That is great for the consumer; it makes it much easier to navigate the services and find what they are looking for, but it makes it much harder for them to be challenged and surprised.

What is the value and role of original British content, telling unique stories of people on these islands? How easy will that be to find if people do not know to look for it and have not viewed it before? Those are the sorts of questions that Ofcom will have to consider. The Bill gives Ofcom the power to issue guidance, but it is important that here in this House we are on top of what Ofcom analyses and recommends, and that we feel that whatever the final wording of the Bill, it ensures that PSBs get a fair share of voice.

Kirsty Blackman: I did not even think about the TV schedule as something that people look at. I never look at a TV schedule. I do not know if my Fire Stick or my PlayStation has a TV schedule. On significant prominence, I was picturing the BBC iPlayer app being at the top of the apps list. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Ofcom should look at both those things: how it appears on the screen and where the public service broadcasters are in any live schedule?

Damian Collins: The hon. Lady makes an important point. It should be easier to find through app stores. Although they are not directly in scope of the legislation because they are not broadcast formats in their own right, that question should be asked—is it easy to find? It should be easy to find on a connected device when it is turned on, and it should be easy to locate the apps.

Ofcom also has to consider whether the business model that underpins connected devices is fair to public service broadcasters. There is no doubt that the business model for Amazon and Google is to try to create a connected device space where all the entertainment exists and is tailored to each person. They also want to build the ad tech into that, so that they are the principal beneficiaries of the ad revenue, by monetising the placement of that content as well and diverting it away from broadcasters who have traditionally sold audiences to make money. That is the underlying problem that public service broadcasting faces today. The sale of audiences to generate advertising revenue to invest in programmes—the model that has fuelled independent public broadcasting for 50 years—is not broken, but it does not work in the way it used to; it is much more diffuse.

The revenue challenges that come from that are extremely real. That is why, on Channel 4, although I am pleased to see the Government's changes to the remit, we need to keep a watching brief to see whether they go far enough. We have not gone as far as Channel 4 asked to go in its counter-offer to privatisation, which was the ability to go to the markets to raise money from private investors to create a programming fund that would invest £1 billion over two years in new programming. If we simply allow Channel 4 to acquire a stake in the making of programmes that it will broadcast, which will make revenue in the future, will that be enough now to meet the challenges that it will face? Given the ongoing pressures this year on declining ad revenue for TV broadcasting, we need to make sure that that will be enough. We should not assume that the measures in the Bill, which are welcome, will be the last word on that. There may be more challenges to come.

I would like to add two further points. It is right that we try to create more parity between the regulation of on-demand online services and broadcast television. If a viewer turns on their connected TV device, as far as they are concerned Netflix is as much television as the BBC, and there should be some parity in the way the platforms are regulated, the obligations they have to their users and the notifications they give about the suitability of the content. That should apply to advertising too. Often the debate we have is around advertising that targets children, but children are not watching live television; they are watching it on demand. The danger at the moment is that we have a highly regulated live broadcast television environment, but an almost completely unregulated online one. We should be far more worried about the ad rules that apply on YouTube than those on

ITV, because that is where the children are. It is vital that the work on the Government's online advertising review is completed at pace. The project has been worked on for a number of years. There needs to be proper enforceability of the advertising codes that have stood us in good stead in the broadcast world, but do not yet work in the same way online.

Finally, on media ownership and media freedom, which the Secretary of State mentioned in her opening remarks, we should give some consideration—maybe the Bill is not the right place—to the ownership of UK news companies and news assets, particularly if they are acquired by organisations based in jurisdictions overseas where maybe the regard for press freedom is not the same as it is in the UK. The Bill does not address that concern. If we have an ongoing concern about a vibrant news media landscape, there should be some concern about the companies that own media organisations—where they are based, what their interests are and what interest they have in the way the news is reported here. We do not want to see the press regulated in any way—we want to avoid that and in many ways the measures in the Bill are a nod to that as well—but we want certainty about safeguarding media freedom in the future.

Andy Carter: My hon. Friend makes a very interesting point about news media. What does he think about the ownership of public service broadcasters? Should there be legislation in place to consider who is allowed to own a public service broadcaster? For example, ITV could be bought and sold tomorrow on the stock exchange to somebody in a different country who has very different values and views on what content might be put out on ITV. Should that be in scope as well?

Damian Collins: My hon. Friend makes a very interesting point. Whether it be ITV or a newspaper such as *The Daily Telegraph*, which is currently up for sale, what is the motivation of someone acquiring them? We might assume they would not seek to censor what was going on, but would they have a different view on creative content, news, the stories they want to tell and what obligations exist for them? That is not something we have had to consider before, but in a market where such media assets are attractive to global investors, we should not be unconcerned about the motivations of investors who might buy those companies.

4.12 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Mòran taing, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate.

There has been much discussion about the impact of the Bill on Gaelic broadcasting and it is that that I would like to reflect on today. I think it is fair to say that in decades gone by—50 or 60 years ago—there was largely indifference to the Gaelic language right across the political divide. That, I am glad to say, has changed. Let me state that the Gaelic language belongs to absolutely everyone and it is right that we continue to look at the support we can give to the language on that cross-party basis. It is important that we retain that consensus. The reason I mention 50 or 60 years ago is because in the 1970s some fundamental changes took place. In some respects, there was a renaissance for the language. We had the establishment of the Gaelic college in Skye—we have just celebrated its 50th anniversary—and there was

everything that happened in a wider sense in music. There was the arrival, again on the island of Skye, of the rock band Runrig, which gave a voice to young people in the language. We think, of course, about what the *West Highland Free Press* did.

My friend the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) reflected on the diminishing numbers of Gaelic speakers in his constituency, but it is important that we retain a sense of perspective. There are some very strong signs about not just the durability but the growth of the language. I can think specifically about Gaelic education. In my own constituency, I have a number of Gaelic primary schools, most recently in Portree. I am delighted that the number of children going to the Gaelic school in Portree is way in excess of the number going to the English language school. There are some very strong and encouraging signs.

In the light of all of that, what we do and in particular what we do in relation to the Media Bill is important. It is worth reflecting that the Government have in the past said some very encouraging things about recognising the importance of the Gaelic language.

According to a White Paper published on 28 April 2022,

“The Government recognises the hugely valuable contribution that MG Alba makes to the lives and wellbeing of Gaelic speakers across Scotland and the UK, including through its unique partnership with the BBC in the provision of BBC ALBA. Such a partnership must ensure high quality, diverse Gaelic language content continues to be readily available so that Gaelic culture is protected in the years to come. We also recognise that certainty of future funding is important for MG ALBA being able to deliver for Gaelic speakers.”

I endorse those words, and I make an appeal to the Minister: that protection of Gaelic really must be included in the Bill, so that we can then have the necessary discussion about the responsibilities we all have to ensure that there is appropriate support for the language.

We have heard a great deal today about remote and rural areas, and I think of the contribution that is made by Gaelic broadcasting in such areas. I think of the production facilities in Inverness, Stornoway and, indeed, Portree in my constituency, associated with the Gaelic college. We are home to some film production activities—I referred earlier to Chris Young, who produced “The Inbetweeners”—and I think of some of the Gaelic drama that has been produced, such as “Bannan”. We often hear about programmes in the UK being sold internationally, and this Gaelic drama has been sold internationally, although admittedly on a shoestring. I have always been overwhelmed when I have had the opportunity to be on site with the 70 or 80 people producing that masterpiece of Gaelic drama.

All of that shows what we are capable of doing throughout these islands, and it shows the ability of people to contribute Gaelic content, but of course it has to be funded. As I mentioned earlier, we face a cataclysmic challenge because of the real-terms decline in funding for MG Alba ever since its foundation in 2008. We are at a crisis point. I welcome the funding that has gone into S4C, but my goodness, if we could get even a fraction of that funding, what a difference it would make. Let us think about not just the social and cultural contribution, but the economic contribution generated by the investment that we have had. MG Alba sustains about 340 full-time jobs, half of which are in the

highlands and islands, and with its annual funding of £13 million, it produces gross value added of more than £17 million. We are talking about a return of £1.34 for every £1 of investment. Just think how it would be if we could increase that, and see more of that economic contribution in our remote and rural areas!

I appeal to the good sense of the Minister, because I know that he has much good sense. I appeal to him to respond positively when he winds up the debate. Let us come together in this Chamber and collectively accept our responsibilities for Gaelic, as we have for other languages. Let us make sure that this station—for MG Alba is a station—can flourish, and that BBC Radio nan Gàidheal can flourish. Again, mòran taing, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.17 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this Second Reading debate on a Bill that comes at a crucial time for our creative industries and broadcasters. Several broadcasters are already applying for the 10-year licences, and we need to have a settled approach to how they can be granted. I should refer the House to my entry in the transparency register, as a former Minister, and to the interests that I have declared in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who was in the Chair earlier, was the director of BBC children’s television in the 1970s. A number of children’s programmes have already been mentioned, but, for what it is worth, my favourites were “Paddington”, “Pipkins” and “Mr Benn”. It has often been said by the person who created “Mr Benn” that children’s television had to attract not only older children but adults, who would often sit watching it alongside the children. It has sparked many a career, including the careers of Members of the other House but also those of some of the greatest broadcasters of today.

The Media Bill reflects the changes in technology and in how people consume broadcasting in a variety of ways. A lot more is consumed on the go or on demand, and I regret that there are fewer community moments—water cooler moments, as they used to be called—but broadcasting still plays a vital role in shaping the conversation, through the fun and joy that people have in watching, as well as in exposing some of the interesting challenges we face.

In this broader landscape and market, I welcome the global online platforms. They have helped the viewer and the creative industries, but they have also brought a risk for our public service broadcasters, particularly our commercial public service broadcasters, who have responsibilities that those other organisations simply do not have. It is important, if those broadcasters are to be viable and sustainable, that we recognise the context in which those platforms land.

There has been at least one call from the shadow Secretary of State for the use of Henry VIII powers, and that is because we need to be flexible. The last time we had similar legislation was in 2003. By the time the Bill goes through, we will need to have that flexibility built in—I hope it goes through at pace, because it really matters to our broadcasters and the industry that it does. As my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

and Hythe (Damian Collins) said, there are certain areas in which Channel 4 would have liked the flexibility to go slightly further. Let us build that flexibility in now and, rather than seeing Henry VIII powers as something bad, look at what they can be used for. I must admit that in my role as a Minister, I found that one of the most flexible pieces of legislation was the Environmental Protection Act 1990. It was by having Henry VIII powers that we were able to keep pace with the challenges we faced, and we should welcome the opportunity to add such powers to this Bill.

I thank the Members of both Houses who performed the pre-legislative scrutiny. That has made it a stronger Bill, and it is important that the Government have largely listened. That shows maturity, and it is why I think the Bill will be a success. I echo Members' comments about ensuring that we use the word "significant" and not just "appropriate" in proposed new sections 362AM and 362AO to the Communications Act 2003, because we need to give clarity and send a firm message to Ofcom. At the end of the day, Ofcom is an independent regulator. It does not represent people right across the country, and it is important that Parliament has a voice in pushing or promoting that.

The Select Committee referred in its report to the use of negative statutory instruments by the Government. I ask the Government to think again slightly. Having experienced a variety of legislation, I know that the role of negative SIs is well established and that they represent about 80% of the legislation that we make. They are used to update minor points. However, it is not necessary to leave such elements to Ofcom or to take these things to court when Parliament can assert that role.

I am really pleased about the change in Government policy that has led to the parts of the Bill that relate to Channel 4. It was under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in 1982 that Channel 4 was created as a way to have a public sector broadcaster that was still state owned but that generated all its revenue privately rather than through the licence fee, and what a job it has done. S4C was, of course, created on the same day. I very much welcome the special status that Channel 4 will continue to have, as well as the new powers that give it the freedom and flexibility to produce. I also welcome the commitments still being made to the independent sector, and I know that Channel 4 will not suddenly rush to bring everything in-house—far from it. Why would it, when the way it has done things so far has been so successful? I pay particular tribute to its exceptional chief executive, Alex Mahon, who has been a real champion for Channel 4 and the creative industries. Long may she flourish.

Turning to the excellent ITV, I suggest that it really needs a level playing field and this kind of opportunity, particularly when it comes to global platforms. The extra burdens put on our public service broadcasters are important to the diversity of the TV that we enjoy, and ITV continues to go from strength to strength. Just like Channel 4, it has made transformations in its filming. Channel 4's portrayal of the Paralympics in 2012 has been recognised around the world as a real game changer by the Paralympic movement. Similarly, ITV broadcasts brave coverage of the news and is spending a lot more money on going to some of the

most challenging parts of the world. Other broadcasters including Sky have done similar things. When we give Ofcom these powers, we must send a strong message about the robust application and enforcement of prominence for PSBs on global online platforms, on terms that enable them to thrive and deliver their remit.

Much has been said about local radio, and a significant number of local radio stations have been created in Suffolk Coastal following the significant reduction in BBC Suffolk's very local content. Although I regret that reduction, it has opened up an opportunity for many more broadcasters. I welcome the provisions in the Bill to make it easier for local radio stations to broadcast and thrive.

On part 7, there is a lesson for all of us in the light of the Leveson inquiry that a knee-jerk reaction to a prominent public inquiry is not necessarily the best way to generate new legislation. I can see why people were so upset, and continue to be upset, when the media seem to have the freedom to trash people's lives and reputations, but it was not the right knee-jerk reaction. It is good that we never commenced section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 and are now repealing it. I would be very concerned if the repeal led to a rush of newspapers suddenly departing from the Independent Press Standards Organisation or Impress. I know that some newspapers have chosen not to use either, but we should not actively encourage that choice through the Bill.

This is a good Bill, and I hope the House will let the Government work at pace. The Bill is important for the commercial viability and sustainability of PSBs, none of which has the benefit of the licence fee, which means that the BBC does not particularly need to work to generate income. I should say that I worked at the BBC for six to nine months before becoming a Member of Parliament, and it has a very special place in UK life, but it is important that we have a wide range of PSBs. The Bill will help to keep PSBs sustainable for the future.

4.27 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I welcome this debate, and I strongly welcome the departure from the idea of selling off and privatising Channel 4. It has been a very good channel that continues to do a lot of innovative things. That it can develop its own content can only be a good thing, as it shows the importance of public service broadcasting.

We should reflect that the Bill is going in the direction of proper regulation of the media, while recognising the value and importance of public service broadcasting. We should compare that with the United States, which, since the second world war, has systematically defunded public service broadcasting and has ended up with news values essentially dominated by Fox News and nothing else. We should value the principle of public service broadcasting.

I am particularly pleased that Gaelic and Welsh-language stations are not only protected but supported by the Bill, as they have greatly increased the speaking of Gaelic and Welsh, enhancing and developing the culture of both Scotland and Wales.

Many of us often criticise journalists, but we very much value the idea of a free press and a free media, which we do not always appear to have. We should

think a little more about the multiple ownership of different media outlets across TV, newspapers, radio and so on.

The Bill is also about trying to keep up with changing technology and a changing media landscape. There was a time when radio was one thing, television was another, social media had not been invented and newspapers were completely separate from all of them. All of those are now essentially merged into one, in some way or another: radio interviews are televised and newspaper articles appear on websites, often with videos. That is not a bad thing—it is often a good thing—but there is a universality to the media, and many people get their information from online sources.

However, we should be slightly cautious because we, in this Chamber, are all media obsessives, I suppose. We probably read newspapers and listen to current affairs programmes more than anybody else in our society, so it is easy to forget that a significant proportion of the population does not watch very much television, has no access to smart phones, does not know how to use a computer and is completely lost in a digital divide. Those people are increasingly isolated and left behind. The Bill does not pretend to give an answer to that. I am not sure there is a simple answer, but we should recognise that a growing proportion of the population—not huge, but significant—often loses out on all kinds of information as a result.

I will briefly address the question of news values. I believe there is a high degree of bias in the way that a lot of news is reported in our media, notably international reporting on global affairs. If something happens in the USA, Europe or whatever war is being followed at that time, be it the horrors of Gaza or Ukraine, that is news, but if something happens in much of Africa, Latin America or south Asia, it is simply not reported at all. The huge conflict going on in the Democratic Republic of Congo receives almost zero coverage in any of our written or broadcast media. The problems of, say, indigenous communities in Ecuador receive no coverage either.

We need to think about how we can encourage all our media to have a more global view when they report globally. The BBC has cut back on its global coverage significantly. It cannot afford to have journalists all around the world, so it puts them in the best known places—Brussels, Washington and so on—and has cut back on many other places. The only global channel that currently tries to report on the whole world is al-Jazeera, which is funded entirely by the Qatar Government and royal family. We need diversity in broadcasting as well as in the way in which the news is chosen. That applies to many other issues as well, including the reporting of environmental affairs and debates about global warming.

Commercial media is driven by the need to make money to survive, so it has no great incentive to do anything other than entertainment, because that is what brings in the audience and advertising. It does not necessarily provide information and education for the population. I realise Ofcom has to do a difficult balancing act, but we should be aware that the majority of the population no longer looks at the two alternatives most of us in the Chamber grew up with—the BBC and ITV—but at a whole plethora of different news outlets. Therefore, those people have a wide variety of news issues thrown at them.

A number of colleagues have raised issues about local journalism and local papers, which also appear heavily online. I once worked in a genuinely local paper—it was printed on the same site where we wrote the stories and it was part of the community. It then became part of a bigger group, then another bigger group and then an even bigger group. Local papers across the country are actually not local at all. They are owned by a media group in a distant place and, if they are lucky, there are one or two journalists in the town in question and they live largely by press releases.

My friend, the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), quite rightly commended the *West Highland Free Press* for its work. I remember that it was set up because of a lack of local reporting. There was a very serious determination by those who set it up to ensure that it was a genuinely independent paper that covered a huge part of Scotland and that was able to build community strengths and links with it, and I think that the paper has been very successful in doing that.

A long distance away and in a completely different kind of community, the *Camden New Journal* group, which also includes the *Islington Tribune* and other enterprises, is, again, a wholly independent group set up by the journalists who worked on the paper when the previous owners essentially walked away from it. It is independent, it is local, and it is co-operatively run. It is also very, very successful, because it concentrates completely on the news and stories within the local community and tries to bring them forward.

Having newspapers and radio stations that cover all languages is also very important. We have talked about Scotland and Wales, but there is also a plethora of communities in this country who want to hear stuff in their own language. I remember speaking in this House, probably from this very spot, in the 1980s, trying to defend London Greek Radio, which was set up as an independent Greek-speaking radio station. It was raided 74 times by the Post Office and all its broadcasting equipment was taken away—goodness knows what happened to the 74 items of broadcasting equipment. Eventually the station was given a licence, and it is now a very successful Greek language radio station. There are many other language radio stations all across the country, which is important. It is important for people growing up in bilingual communities to be able to listen to things in their own language, and for young people to feel that sense of belonging to the Greek, to the Turkish, to the Somali or to any other community, as well as being able to communicate in English. That to me is the great value of local radio stations.

My final point is about social media. When I go to meetings, I often ask people how many of them ever buy a newspaper. If the audience has nobody in it over the age of 50, no hand goes up. Younger people simply do not buy newspapers at all—they have no relationship with them. They rely completely on social media for their news, information and ideas. We all access social media. We are all driven in social media by various algorithms, some of which are owned by people far away, who have patented those algorithms. They follow us, they follow our interests and they decide what news we ought to have. It is hardly a free media when we are directed to the news that somebody wants us to hear. It is not simple. It is not simple to regulate on what algorithms do, but we should be extremely well aware of it.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

We should also be aware that it is possible to set up a radio station—unless I am wrong about this Bill—that is purely online. There is no regulation of it whatsoever, other than the basics of libel law and things such as that. That is an area that will grow. It is an area that is increasing, and some of the online radio stations have very large audiences indeed. Some of them are very good, and some of them less so, but we must be aware of that and the need in the longer term for further regulation and control of the behaviour of algorithms and how they can influence opinion—politically, socially and commercially—and everything else in our lives.

We should just take a moment to think of the bravery of many journalists around the world, including those who have been killed in Gaza over the past few weeks; those who are in prison in Egypt, in Russia and in a number of other countries; and those who risk everything in order to try to get the news out. They need support and protection in every way possible.

I would also like to put it on record that we should reflect quite seriously on the situation facing one of the world's best-known investigative journalists—that of Julian Assange, who has now spent almost five years in a maximum security prison for revealing uncomfortable truths about Iraq and other places. Journalism at its best tells us the truth. At its worst, it is propaganda for somebody else and somebody very, very powerful.

4.39 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I agree with some of the comments of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), in particular his comments about the bravery of journalists covering conflict around the world today.

It is very doubtful that there will be a Division on the Bill this evening. We have had something of a love-in, with contributions from all parties saying that they support the Bill. I do not want to shatter that consensus, but I am going to do so. Although it is clear that the Opposition are not going to divide the House on Second Reading, I must say to them that, had they chosen to do that, I would have supported them. I would have done so purely because of the strength of my feelings about clause 50, which repeals section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. I believe consistency in this place matters, even though it might sometimes be elusive. The truth is that section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act was part of a Conservative-drafted compromise following the Leveson inquiry. It was a compromise in which I had a hand, and I am not about to vote against it, today or at any other point.

The reason I supported the thrust of the Leveson proposals at the time was not despite my being a Conservative, but because I am a Conservative, and true Conservatives believe in accountability. It is true Conservatives who, throughout history, have faced down powerful vested interests and it is true Conservatives who will always look out for the underdog, whatever the consequences might be. The Leveson inquiry followed decades of failure on the part of the press to engage seriously with self-regulation, and the craven failure of this House over 70 years to act on the findings of no fewer than seven inquiries and Royal Commissions set up during that time.

It is often the case that we never quite know when something that is known to be a problem will become a big story—a running story, as we call it in the media. It was the hacking of the phone of Milly Dowler, the murdered schoolgirl, that made this House decide to act. Therefore it was a Conservative Prime Minister at the time who condemned the Press Complaints Commission as wholly ineffective. It was a Conservative Prime Minister who set up the inquiry. It was a Conservative Prime Minister who chose Lord Justice Leveson to lead that inquiry—in part because Lord Justice Leveson was recognised as somebody who respected the press and believed passionately in the freedom of the press, and could therefore be relied upon to come up with a sensible set of proposals.

It was a Conservative Prime Minister who wrote the terms of reference of the Leveson inquiry and a Conservative Prime Minister who said that that inquiry should make policy recommendations to the Government. When that report came back, it was a Conservative Prime Minister who stated on the Floor of this House that we could not just say, “Let’s have one last chance saloon for the press again.”, because we had done that. When that report landed—all 1,800 pages, in four volumes—my noble Friend Lord Cameron, then Prime Minister, asked Oliver Letwin to work out a way to implement the proposals of the Leveson inquiry.

There followed a series of compromises to accommodate some of the concerns of the press. First, while Lord Leveson had recommended that there should be a statutory body, preferably Ofcom, that would act as the recognition body, that was seen to be problematic by the press. So Oliver Letwin came up with the rather ingenious idea of establishing a Royal Charter for the self-regulation of the press. The press then raised concerns that a future Government might be able unilaterally to change the terms of that charter simply by bringing forward Orders in Council. We accepted that that was a very fair concern. Paradoxically, the press then asked whether Parliament could safeguard the integrity of the Royal Charter by ensuring that it could be amended or removed only if there were a super-majority of both Houses of Parliament and, in addition to that, a super-majority in the Scottish Parliament.

Finally, there was a lot of discussion about the editors’ code and who should hold the pen. The media felt that existing editors should always hold the pen on the editors’ code, which was contrary to what Lord Leveson had suggested. Again, however, to carry the press with us—as it had said that it would work with us if we made the concessions that it wanted—we made that final concession to ensure that the editors’ code would always be written by the newspaper industry, not by any other independent body.

At various stages during those multiple concessions, Oliver Letwin asked me whether I would help to broach conversations with the Opposition parties with a view to forming a cross-party consensus on the matter, and I did so in good faith. At this point, I pay particular tribute to the Mother of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who was at that time the shadow Secretary of State, and to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), who was then the Leader of the Opposition, for the way in which they approached the issue. The easiest thing for any Opposition to do is

simply to oppose everything for the sake of it, but on that issue, they recognised the importance of trying to arrive at a consensus in Parliament for the good of civil society.

I hope that you will not mind if I pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, in your former guise as Opposition Chief Whip. I remember attending one meeting where it was somewhat presumed that I would be able to turn up on the night with 70 Conservative rebels to defeat the Government. You probably saw the anguish on my face at the daunting prospect of having to do such a thing. You made everybody else in the room aware that Whips' Offices can, when they put their minds to it, be pretty good at burning off opposition.

It is true that the victims of phone hacking were quite concerned about the level of compromise that politicians were making on their behalf. I remember Hugh Grant being particularly sceptical of that. We got him in and said, "Trust us; we are going to do this. This is a cross-party consensus: all parties are signed up to it. It will happen." It is disappointing that, a decade on, Hugh Grant is being proved right because of the Government's actions through the Bill.

Some months after we had put in place the royal charter for the self-regulation of the press, I met Sir Alan Moses, who was the first inaugural chairman of the Independent Press Standards Organisation, the industry's own regulator. I remember saying to Sir Alan, "IPSO is making good progress. It is an improvement on the PCC. It wouldn't have to do a great deal more in order for it to be a recognised regulator. Why doesn't IPSO simply seek recognition?" He said, "George, I completely agree with you. However, my contract of employment forbids me from saying so publicly." How is that for the freedom of speech that we hear so much about? Sir Alan Moses, the inaugural chairman of IPSO, was subject to a gagging order, no less, that prevented him from saying what he believed to be true.

Let me turn to the specifics of section 40, which put in place one of the key provisions of Leveson's recommendations: the creation of incentives for an industry regulator to seek recognition. That is often misunderstood, for the provisions of section 40 are symmetrical: not only does it protect innocent people who want redress and access to a process of arbitration, but it protects publishers from people with deep pockets who go to lawyers such as Carter-Ruck or Schillings and threaten litigation—through so-called SLAPPs—to intimidate and bully publishers and prevent them from publishing things. Had we put that in place and commenced section 40, if a Russian oligarch, for instance, had said, "If you print that, I will see you in court," and all sorts of injunctions came forth from various lawyers, a publisher would have been able to say, "No, you won't. We will see you in arbitration." That would have protected genuine investigative journalism in a way that has never been done before.

Jeremy Corbyn: The right hon. Gentleman is making a most interesting speech. He must be aware that the laws relating to libel and so on are completely misshapen, in that it is totally a rich person's game. Anyone without resources gets threatened with libel and is silenced immediately. They have no recourse to legal aid and no other way of dealing with the situation other than either to accept something they believe to be wrong or to make themselves bankrupt trying to defend themselves.

George Eustice: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The truth is that the system of arbitration, backed up by the cost provisions under section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, protected small, plucky journalists working for small publishers as much as it protected the weak and vulnerable who could not afford legal action. It is important to note that the arbitration system envisaged would only have engaged at all where there was what is called a cause of action, which is to say where people have a case in law. The arbitration system would never have become overwhelmed, since there would have been a sifting process to take out simple complaints about inaccuracy and so forth. In essence, the system would have focused predominantly on the areas of defamation and privacy.

We even considered what I used to term the *Private Eye* test, which is to say that if we have a publication that for all sorts of ideological reasons has never joined up to anything at all—bear in mind that *Private Eye* never even joined the Press Complaints Commission—there was an option for them to be able to demonstrate adherence to the principles set out in the royal charter while not joining a body. There was also a large area of discretion for the courts on an individual case. While there was a strong margin of appreciation in favour of those who signed up, it was not black and white. The clause stated that where it was "reasonable in the circumstances" for a court to find a different position, it had the right to do so.

I am therefore generally critical, as the House can understand, of the repeal of section 40, but I welcome the fact that the Government have committed to the continued existence of the royal charter on the self-regulation of the press and that they have no intention of bringing forward any Order in Council to disband the Press Recognition Panel. It is important to recognise that Leveson did not recommend that we needed to take a legal provision through an Act of Parliament to give effect to these cost provisions. His recommendation was that we or the courts could use the Civil Procedure Act 1997 to set civil procedure rules to create a margin of appreciation and an incentive in favour of those who joined an independent regulator.

While the Government legislated in this place, albeit that they then failed to commence the order, it was entirely understandable that the Civil Procedure Rule Committee and the Master of the Rolls might have felt it inappropriate for them to act in this space. Now that the Government have signalled their intention to vacate this space, it is entirely open to the Master of the Rolls and the Civil Procedure Rule Committee to make their own civil procedure rules in this space to give effect to the Leveson inquiry. Let us not forget that that inquiry was established under the Inquiries Act 2005 and is explicitly referenced in the royal charter. It would be fair and reasonable for the courts to give consideration and weight to that fact.

An important duty now falls to the Press Recognition Panel. That body, independent of Government, does not need to wait for advice or permission from Government; it is entirely open to the Press Recognition Panel to put together a detailed report setting out its recommendations for what the alternative incentives might be to encourage publishers to sign up to a recognised regulator. It may come up with some useful advice for all parties in this House as they consider their manifestos going forward.

[George Eustice]

In conclusion, I feel that the failure to commence the full architecture of the Leveson proposals was a terrible missed opportunity for the press, and I say that as one of the few Members on these Benches who first came into Parliament with a brown Press Gallery pass. I knew every single one of the journalists in the Press Gallery and the news organisations they worked for, and I developed a strong appreciation and respect for the individual character of each and every one of those newspaper organisations—even the ones that were often critical of the party on the Government Benches—as I understood their tradition.

Those of us who really believed in the freedom of the press and wanted to see the press thrive had in our minds that if it sought recognition, it would become distinguished from social media and other news content. A decade ago, we were already seeing the start of so-called “fake news” and the idea put forward by Leveson was that a recognised regulator could be used as a Kitemark showing a news organisation’s commitment to ethical journalism. That would be a positive and would restore trust in our press, which had been lost over the years. The idea was that the Broadcasting Act 1996, covered today in much of this Bill, would affect the regulated broadcasters, but that there would be a much more flexible, self-regulatory model for the press or other online content. We could also see, even 10 years ago, that there was going to be a convergence between broadcast media, who would increasingly have online news content in written form, and the print media, who would increasingly be online and would have podcasts and video content. Therefore, a blurring would take place in the traditional distinction between broadcast and print journalism. The great beauty of the architecture we put in place with the royal charter for the self-regulation of the press is that it enabled there to be multiple regulators, some of which might specialise just in online news and others that might specialise just in the printed press, with everything else in between. Had we implemented that, we would have had a great opportunity to restore trust in the truthfulness and integrity of journalism in this country.

There is a final reason why I believe it was short-sighted of the press not to do this. When the courts see that over a period of time there has been intransigence on the part of the press to take standards and genuine accountability seriously, and a craven weakness in this House to act in this space at all, they will make public policy decisions. It is no good complaining about SLAPPs, privacy injunctions and so forth when this House has failed to do even the most basic things to put in place some sensible protections for our civil society. So I would have opposed this Bill on those grounds alone, but I recognise that it contains much else that has cross-party support. I hope that the Government will consider removing clause 50 at a later stage of our consideration of this Bill.

4.57 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the Media Bill. I wish to focus narrowly on part 4, which sets out the provisions on public service broadcasting and gives Ofcom powers to draft and enforce a video-on-demand code. The Bill proposes to do that by extending audience

protection measures, for example, age ratings and content warnings, that are currently enforced for broadcast media and BBC iPlayer-only to all on-demand programme services.

A number of colleagues have mentioned how the media landscape has evolved rapidly in our lifetimes. I remember the black-and-white telly in my parent’s lounge, with the choice of just three or four channels. I remember traditional linear TV, where we would all sit around to watch a programme and we would not answer the phone or the doorbell, because if we missed something, that was it. I remember my grandparents getting a VHS player before we did in the 1980s and my grandma would record “Thomas the Tank Engine” and “Postman Pat” for us, and we would binge watch it when we went to stay with her. Of course, so much has changed since then, and when my children were young, they did not even understand the concept of linear TV. I remember going to stay with a family member who did not have a smart TV at the time and my children did not understand how they could not watch “Octonauts” right that minute.

So much has changed in our lifetime. Of course, there are many wonderful aspects of media programming in this country—we have some fantastic content that is the envy of the world—but there are also some not-so-wonderful aspects, and there is lots of material out there that may be entertaining for adults but we definitely do not want children to see. That is the point of the Ofcom broadcasting code, which says for broadcast TV:

“1.1: Material that might seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of people under eighteen must not be broadcast.

1.2: In the provision of services, broadcasters must take all reasonable steps to protect people under eighteen.

1.3: Children must also be protected by appropriate scheduling from material that is unsuitable for them.”

A healthy family media environment relies on parents being able to keep children safe by making sure they do not accidentally come upon content that is not suitable, and on parents having control over what is suitable for their own children. It goes without saying that young children should not be watching violence, sex, extreme language and all those kinds of things. We accept that as a society, and that is why we have rules and systems in place to help parents and to stop children seeing unsuitable content.

Our traditional on-demand media—cinema, DVD and VHS—is regulated by the British Board of Film Classification, which is a highly respected organisation that has been going for over 100 years. We are all familiar with the little triangles telling us that a film is a U, PG, 12 and so on. Our TV scheduling is regulated by the broadcasting code, which mainly relies on the watershed so that broadcasters do not put out programmes before 9 pm that children should not see. On demand presents a new challenge for our broadcasters, because the watershed does not apply. By definition, all the content is available all the time, and therefore parents cannot rely on the fact that it is before 9 o’clock to know that a particular programme is safe.

Some commercial streaming services have voluntarily adopted the BBFC’s ratings. Netflix is a good example. It has adopted the U, PG, 12 and so on ratings. That is really important, because the BBFC ratings are some of the clearest, most transparent and most respected in the whole world. The BBFC even has an app now where

parents can look for any programme or film, and it will tell them the rating and exactly why that rating is given, so that parents can be fully informed about what children are going to watch.

I visited the BBFC a couple of weeks ago—I highly recommend that to Members; it is more than willing to give briefings—to see how it rates films, trailers and programmes. It is a hugely impressive organisation, with enormous levels of trust from not just the content creators but the public. It surveys 10,000 members of the public every four years to ask them about their attitudes to violence, swearing, sex, drugs and so on, to feed into its ratings, so that there is buy-in from the public.

Some services have not opted into the BBFC ratings or produced a suitable rating system of their own. The most significant player in this category is Disney+, which has an opaque system of age rating that cannot be trusted by parents. For example, the film “Avatar”, which I think most people would say is suitable for children, has a rating of 16+, and yet a quite sinister adaptation of “A Christmas Carol” that involves nudity, horror, child molestation, forced prostitution and a depiction of child drowning has a rating of 9+.

The problem is that when parents see that kind of discrepancy, and when the ratings are opaque and there is no transparency about why things are rated in the way they are, parents just remove the passwords, because they think, “I want my child to be able to see ‘Avatar’”. But in removing the passwords or changing the settings on their account, they inadvertently enable children to watch a lot of material that is not suitable for them.

Clearly, Disney+ and other streaming services need to be subject to the same standards as broadcast media. If material is unsuitable for children, it is unsuitable whatever the platform on which it is viewed, and it is the intention of the Bill to remedy that. Clause 38 will require Ofcom to review audience protection measures used by providers of all on-demand tier 1 programme services, including those that do not have their headquarters in the UK. In other words, the Bill seeks to ensure that what we might call the new media—streamed content—is subject to the same audience protection measures, such as age ratings, content warnings, parental control and age assurance measures, as traditional and linear material such as cinema, DVD and broadcast TV.

So far, so good—that is a laudable and much-needed aim—but my question to the Government is, why reinvent the wheel? Why task Ofcom with another review and developing another new code, when we already have a world-leading regulatory framework in the BBFC? Why not instead extend the remit of the BBFC—an internationally trusted organisation—and an age-rating system understood by millions who already use streaming media, so that those familiar ratings logos of U, PG, 15 and so on are visible on each and every programme on every streaming platform?

Indeed, 88% of parents find the BBFC ratings on Netflix extremely helpful, so it would make sense to standardise these ratings across all the major streaming platforms. The platforms would pay the cost—that is how the BBFC is funded, so it would not require a massive expansion of the BBFC. For example, the BBFC gives the code and the transparent materials for rating to Netflix; Netflix polices itself, and every so often, the BBFC will check that it is fully compliant

with the way it regulates itself. There would be a clear advantage to extending that universal rating system across all streaming services: it would not be reinventing the wheel, and there are also serious question marks about Ofcom’s capacity to deliver on both the requirements in this Bill and the significantly increased requirements placed on it by the passage of the Online Safety Act 2023. I urge the Minister to consider amending the Bill to use the BBFC and its code, rather than Ofcom, to achieve the aims of clause 38.

I also urge the Minister to consider extending the remit of the Bill’s audience protection provisions beyond broadcast and streaming to all UK-accessible video content, including online. I appreciate that that would be a very significant expansion of the Bill, but if its purpose is to bring audience protection regulation up to date with the current and future media landscape, we are just skirting around the issue if we do not include online content. Indeed, the principle of part 4 of the Bill is to create that parity between online and offline. Nowhere is that more needed than in the much less regulated online space.

I say that principally because of the proliferation of unregulated hardcore pornography on the internet—pornography that would be completely illegal in the offline world, on DVDs or on streaming services—that is now being viewed by millions, including children, and causing immense societal damage. We are not talking about erotic magazines passed by teenage boys around the bike sheds, but extreme, violent, hardcore, repulsive and completely illegal material: violent rapes, violent assaults and incest. It is the most unimaginable, degrading material—material that is illegal offline on traditional platforms, and always has been. If we are rightly convinced that it matters what people watch—that it matters that children are protected from strong content, whether they are watching it on TV, streaming it on demand or seeing it on their phones—we have to apply the same principle to pornography.

A third of the internet is pornography; Pornhub has more users than Twitter, Instagram, Netflix, Pinterest, Zoom and LinkedIn put together. It is a \$100 million industry, and algorithms draw users into more and more extreme material. The Government’s own research makes the link between viewing violent pornography and violence against women and girls, yet the average age of first viewing in this country is 11. We will never turn the tide on violence against women and girls unless we recognise the role of pornography in conditioning men and boys to link violence with sexual pleasure. That is why I urge the Minister to bring online pornography content within the scope of the audience protection measures in the Bill.

The Online Safety Act will go some way towards helping in this space: its age verification provisions will make it harder for under-18s to access that content. I very much commend the Government on accepting those amendments, which had cross-party support. But that Act missed an opportunity to crack down on online porn that would be completely illegal in the offline world—material that still proliferates online and, even with the new protections, will of course be accessed by some children. Again, the BBFC can have a role here, because it is the BBFC’s role to regulate offline porn, such as DVDs, and certain adult websites. It has a very effective working relationship with the adult industry

[*Miriam Cates*]

and with payment providers, so if the BBFC establishes that a particular adult platform has on it a video that is illegal and should be taken down, it can contact the payment providers and ask them to deny payment to that website until the video is taken down.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the BBFC is also a very established brand that is trusted and understood by the public, so the public would themselves have confidence if the BBFC was given the ability to act in this space?

Miriam Cates: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is exactly why I am calling for the BBFC to have a much greater role in this Bill, but also for that role to be extended to the regulation of pornography. The BBFC has been going for over 100 years; other countries look to it and its ratings. It has buy-in from the public and from the content creators themselves, so it is perfectly placed to provide the kind of regulation and expertise we need. If we really want online and offline parity when it comes to audience safety—of course we do, because it does not matter where this content is viewed; it will have the same effect—we must look to include pornography in the scope of the Bill. I would go so far as to say that if the Government really want to leave a legacy of child protection and reducing violence against women and girls, nothing is more important than preventing access to hardcore pornography that is, and always has been, illegal in the offline world.

I welcome the Bill; it contains some excellent provisions. Obviously, I have focused narrowly on one aspect of it, but I ask Ministers to consider mandating that all streaming services use the BBFC's age verification ratings, and extending audience protection measures to online content, especially violent pornography.

5.9 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I am delighted to see this Bill before the House today. It has been a long time coming, and its arrival is extremely welcome.

From a very young age, I wanted to be a broadcaster. So committed was I to this goal that I wrote to BBC Radio Oxford at the tender age of 15, and complained that it did not produce any programmes for teenagers. Somewhat to my surprise, it told me to put my money where my mouth was, and invited me to go in and make them myself. My first series covered such weighty topics as spots and school dinners; life as a teenager was rather more naive in that long ago era.

After university, I joined the BBC full time in its news and current affairs department, working as a reporter, presenter and producer. As the Spice Girls, in a blaze of colour, heralded the launch of Channel 5 in 1997, I perched on the newsroom desk to prove that current affairs did not have to be stuffy and boring. Indeed, so keen were we to be modern and relevant that I was even allowed to have a cameo as a newscaster in “Shaun of the Dead”. There being no greater possible pinnacle of an on-air career, I then moved behind the scenes to work as an adviser to ITV for several years.

I recount this biography not as an application to make a late appearance on the new series of “I’m a Celebrity”—I feel these Benches have provided enough victims of that recently—but to show that I have been

lucky enough to have some experience of the subject matter, and perhaps more importantly, to illustrate the wide range of the country's public service broadcasting landscape. All the broadcasters I have mentioned—the BBC, Channel 5 and ITV—have in common that they are PSBs, and it is on them that I wish to devote most of my remarks.

Public service broadcasting is not just about news and current affairs, crucial though they are; it is about reflecting all parts of our country, not just the metropolitan elites, not just London—and, indeed, not just England, as we have heard from our colleagues in the Scottish National party. It is also about showing programmes that do not just have an immediate commercial rationale. As one example, I think Channel 5's commitment to children's programming is commendable, and its recent commission of an animated series with disabled lead characters for pre-school children is incredibly important.

As the Government themselves have stated, this Bill will

“reform the legal framework for the regulation of public service broadcasting”,

and there can be no doubt that this is sorely needed, because the media and entertainment landscape, as we have heard several times, has changed almost beyond recognition over the past 20 years. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and my hon. Friends the Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) have touched on some of the circumstances we faced in 2003, such as watching analogue TV, Netflix still posting DVDs to its customers and Blockbuster Video still existing on our high streets. YouTube, iPhones and Twitter had not been invented, yet they are the ways in which we watch much of our content these days.

Let me add some other cultural memories of that year. Jemini—with a J—scored “nul points” at Eurovision, Cilla Black quit “Blind Date” live on air and Jonny Wilkinson scored a last-minute drop goal that won the Rugby world cup and the nation's hearts. That same year, 2003, more than 19 million viewers were glued to their screens as the “Coronation Street” serial killer Richard Hillman abducted the Platts and drove the family into the canal. It was must-watch TV the length and breadth of the country. However, those TV audience numbers for drama could only be dreamt of today. Indeed, the entire TV landscape is almost unrecognisable, thanks to rapid developments in technology that have in turn brought about fundamental changes in viewing habits. Today, 75% of households have an on-demand streaming service, and according to Ofcom, 90% of 18 to 24-year-old adults bypass TV channels and head straight to streaming, on-demand and social video services when they are looking for something to watch.

While the likes of Netflix, Prime and Disney offer a panoply of great programming, they are not bound by the requirements on our public service broadcasters—the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. The responsibility that PSBs bear to present socially valuable content carries a burden, and it is only right that that is reflected in the regulatory regime. Key to achieving that is ensuring due prominence for PSBs on whatever device. At its simplest, there is no value in having high quality, publicly important programming if viewers cannot find it quickly and easily, yet that is increasingly the risk with the market as it is today.

We are all familiar with the shift away from an on-screen list of TV programmes—electronic programme guides—to a set of tiles along the bottom of our screens, but whereas the lowest numbers on an old EPG could easily be reserved for the PSBs, the tiles can be set in pretty much any order. Inevitably, those linked to the highest paying providers of content, or otherwise prioritised, are frequently the first to be seen. It can take many clicks on the remote to get to the smaller PSBs: Channels 4 and 5.

I strongly welcome the Government's provisions on the new online prominence regime, and I agree with ITV that a "clear mandate" must be

"given to Ofcom for a muscular implementation of the Bill...on terms that enable PSBs to flourish and deliver their remits."

I would be grateful if the Minister set out in a little more detail how he envisages Ofcom implementing the new regime, and said whether he supports the regulator taking a bold stance to ensure that global companies comply with our decisions in Parliament for an appropriate level of prominence for our PSBs.

I would also be grateful for reassurance that a secondary power to designate platforms will be cast as broadly as necessary to achieve the aims of Bill. For example, that could potentially include gaming consoles, which I understand from much younger colleagues are often used to access PSB content. This is not just about watching the box in the corner of the room. The requirement to give PSBs prominence cannot become a licence to print money by the platforms carrying them, so I welcome the Bill's proposals for a must-offer, must-carry regime, with an arbitration scheme as a backstop.

The other side of the coin is that the privilege of prominence carries with it a duty, and nowhere more so than at the BBC. It must do better if it is to retain its hallowed position as the most prominent and privileged of the PSBs, because it is funded by all of us through the licence fee. I have said before that I believe that that funding method is living on borrowed time; it is an anachronistic and frankly regressive tax. During my 12 years as a magistrate, I saw the painful impact, particularly on some women, of the draconian measures that are taken against those who cannot afford to pay that licence. Although the future of the licence fee is not part of today's debate, the funding model puts additional and serious duties on the BBC as a PSB.

I fear that the BBC is no longer the organisation that I joined more than 30 years ago. We are all familiar with the growing torrent of criticism, not least of aspects of its coverage of the middle east crisis. Although there are undoubtedly some phenomenally good and brave journalists in the field, there have also been some appalling and inexcusable lapses in the BBC's reporting. Responsibility for that must go to the very top of the newsroom, and it must always be remembered that the facts are far more important than a juicy headline. I fear that if it is not careful, BBC Verify will have to start scrutinising its own newsroom, and that was not the idea of it in the first place.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Leaving aside the newsroom, when pensioners started paying the licence fee again, I had a large number of them in my constituency. Three of them made contact with me, one of whom objected, and two of whom were trying to pay in an old-fashioned

way that the BBC's agents could not cope with. That shows that the licence subscription system works pretty well and is welcomed. I say to my hon. Friend that if we had the alternative to the licence fee, or some other kind of household impost, we would have a subscription where the BBC stops serving everyone in the country, and starts serving those who choose to pay. As it is a national institution, we still face the question put by the Canadian, Graham Spry, nearly 100 years ago:

"It is a choice between the state and the United States."

Let us choose the state and make it a public broadcaster still.

Rob Butler: I thank the Father of the House for his intervention. He raises important points, which is why we will need to have a long and detailed debate on the future of the licence fee at another time. I chose my words relatively carefully in saying that I hoped the licence fee was living on borrowed time, rather than saying that the end must come immediately. My hon. Friend raises points that will have to be addressed before we move to another system, but I personally feel that the current model is not sustainable in the medium to long term.

It is not just me who has raised concerns about the BBC. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, trust in BBC News has plummeted from 75% in 2018 to 55% in 2022. That trend clearly cannot continue.

I have focused my remarks principally on broadcasters, as that is where the majority of my experience lies, but I will turn for a moment to the print media. I listened carefully to the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), and I am afraid to disappoint him but I agree rather more with my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) on section 40. I am glad to see the Bill removing that sword of Damocles from newspapers. It struck me that, although it was never commenced, it loomed over papers and magazines as a potential form of state control that would have been unconscionable interference in the freedom of the press. While I have many quibbles with both national and local newspapers about how they cover some stories, I felt that the draconian measures in section 40 were an entirely disproportionate way to tackle complaints.

George Eustice *rose*—

Rob Butler: I will make one or two more points, just in case they answer my right hon. Friend's question, but I will certainly give way in a moment.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom, it was a surprise to me that it was ever considered appropriate to oblige the publisher to pay the costs of both sides in a legal claim, even if the publication won the case. I know that that stance was taken by the organisation Reporters Without Borders. Thankfully, the Bill will put that right, and I am reassured that the industry's own actions in recent years in setting up its own regulator, IPSO, and beefing up internal complaints handling procedures have proved effective, without the need for further statutory intervention.

George Eustice: Obviously, the easy way for any publisher to avoid the cost provisions would be to seek recognition. What is it about the Leveson recommendations

[George Eustice]

that my hon. Friend disagrees with so much? What in the royal charter for the self-regulation of the press does he find objectionable and impossible for a news organisation to subscribe to?

Rob Butler: As I just outlined, my principal concern is about the suggestion that a publisher would have to pay the loser's costs, irrespective of what those costs could be.

The Government have considered the many factors in play in reaching this decision. It is important to say that this is not a licence for newspapers to print whatever they wish—I hope that is understood in my local area by the *Bucks Herald* and the *Bucks Free Press*. There are undoubtedly times when the line between fact, comment and insinuation seems to be ever thinner. Self-regulation brings with it a responsibility to get articles right first time, as well as to give sufficient opportunity for a right to reply and appropriate space for both sides of the story. I hope that newspaper owners and editors will take the opportunity of the repeal of section 40 to redouble their efforts to justify the trust we are putting in them to work to the highest standards.

The Media Bill is essential to securing the long-term future of our public service broadcasters. More than that, it gives confidence to our nation's wider creative economy. We need to ensure that the Bill gets on to the statute book as smoothly and quickly as possible. I have not proposed amendments or called for specific changes because I recognise the urgency. The industry has worked closely with the Department for many months, if not years. As a result, I believe that we have before us a Bill that is well thought-out, fit for the future and fair to all. I am delighted to give it my enthusiastic support.

5.23 pm

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler). I fear that I may repeat much of what he just said. I am pleased to be speaking in this debate, a week on from the King's Speech debate in which I spent quite a bit of time calling on the Government to get on and introduce the Media Bill. For once, they listened to me—that's nice.

The Media Bill we are debating is the first piece of media legislation for 20 years. The media landscape has changed beyond belief in the last two decades—it is vastly different from the world we lived in 20 years ago—so the Bill is vital to supporting broadcasters and audiences in the modern age. As the media landscape has changed, it is important that we support legislation without delay to give certainty to this important sector. We should recognise that the Bill will probably govern the media landscape for the next 20 years, so it must be forward-thinking, outward-looking and open, just as the previous legislation was.

I declare my interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary media group and the all-party parliamentary group on commercial radio. Let me start by saying that I welcome the Bill, which responds well to the needs of the sector. Because of time limitations, I will focus my remarks on three specific areas of the Bill. I will do something that I rarely do, and put television ahead of radio.

I welcome the Government's commitment to simplifying the existing remit for public service broadcasters. PSBs are what make our television landscape renowned around the world, but they face unprecedented competition for viewers, programming content and talent in an era when global streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime are producing original content and becoming increasingly dominant in the market. It is good that we have more content producers, but even better, they are choosing to make content here in the UK because of our regulatory framework.

TV prominence is about ensuring that UK viewers can easily find public service content that they value. We are living in an increasingly global marketplace, but there is still an appetite for programmes that reflect British values. In fact, around seven in 10 UK adults want UK life and culture to be represented on screen, and a similar number agree that PSBs make programmes designed for UK audiences. Why is it important that we introduce legislation to protect PSBs? Surely, viewers will want to watch the programmes that they make.

Until now, in return for providing public service content, the Government, through Ofcom, have allocated frequencies to broadcasters. In a relatively uncomplicated world, those channels have been easy to find on electronic programme guides: ITV, and STV in Scotland, on channel 3; Channel 4 and Channel 5 on their respective channels. Once someone has tuned in their TV to the nearest transmitter, they press the number on their remote control and the channel is there.

In a future world where the internet is used to deliver the linear TV and video on demand, the tech companies and platforms will decide where products and programmes appear. In fact, at the moment, if Samsung or LG decided not to include the BBC iPlayer app on their TV screens, there is nothing the BBC, UK viewers or the Government could do about it. If Amazon decided to double the charge for Channel 4's on-demand service to appear on its Fire Stick, there is little Channel 4 could do about it. From speaking to Channel 4, I know that when Amazon moved the location of the Channel 4 app on the Fire Stick, there was a significant alteration in the viewing of Channel 4. It matters where the apps are located on the relevant platform.

If we want to make sure that British viewers can easily find BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5, and STV in Scotland and S4C in Wales, we need to agree the framework that will ensure that platforms carry those services. I fully support that. I also urge the Government to look carefully at using the word "significant" rather than "appropriate". That will determine where the channels are found on those platforms.

Kirsty Blackman: I wholeheartedly agree that it is not just about the schedule. As I said earlier, I was not aware that we had a schedule. We do not use Freeview; we open the Fire Stick or PlayStation and look at the apps. The prominence of the apps is important. If someone does not have terrestrial TV or an aerial hooked up, that is the only way that they are able to consume the public service broadcast content.

Andy Carter: There may be an age divide that determines whether someone looks at an electronic programme guide or the *Radio Times*, or whether they just look for a tile. The notion that viewers want to continue to use

linear TV is important. That is why it is so critical that we legislate in the right way to make sure that British viewers can find it.

The changes in the Bill will impact Channel 4 more than any other PSB, given its unique publisher-broadcaster licence. Channel 4's status, introduced by the Conservative Government back in the 1980s, has significantly aided the development of the independent production sector in the UK over the last 40 years, which is now worth nearly £4 billion. The removal of the publisher-broadcaster restrictions will allow for Channel 4 to produce its own content, as opposed to simply commissioning or acquiring all of its content from third parties. Why does that matter? For the first time, it will allow Channel 4, when it produces content, to own the rights for that content, which it can then sell around the world, creating another stream of revenue which will allow products and programmes to be funded on Channel 4.

The Government have announced plans to increase Channel 4's independent production quota as part of the changes. However, there will be many small production companies in areas such as the north-west of England, which have seen a rapid growth in independent production businesses, who are still unsure about the full impact the changes will have for them. Will the Minister, in his response, expand a little more on what the changes will mean for those businesses and give some assurances that they will still be able to thrive once Channel 4 receives its new licence and the Bill receives Royal Assent?

Channel 4 has indicated that it will maintain its existing commitment to spend 50% of its budget for main channel commissions outside London. That is really important to regional production. Ofcom has announced that it will be consulting on whether changes will need to be made to Channel 4's regional programming making quotas. Is the Minister able to provide a timeline for that consultation, so we know when any changes will come into effect?

I want to touch on local TV and echo some of the comments from other hon. and right hon. Members. I have received representations from the local TV networks who are concerned that the current Bill does not guarantee local TV service prominence in the new TV ecology, and neither does it grant powers on a par with those of local radio services. At some point, the sector will start to provide streamed linear programme services. Will the Government be giving consideration to including local TV as part of the licensed public service channel designation in the Bill to help ensure sustainability for the sector? It really is important that there is an understanding for this sector going forward, because it is making decisions today on the future of its business plans.

Finally on TV, if we are looking to the next 20 years, because this is the only Bill we are likely to see in the media landscape, we should be conscious that the previous broadcasting Bill ran for 20 years. On the Government's management of a digital terrestrial television switchover, I have been reassured in my conversations with the Minister that he wants terrestrial television to remain accessible for the foreseeable future. I very much agree with him on that. When he is summing up, could he give an indication of the criteria he might want to set before broadcast TV services on Freeview are considered for switch off? That was in place for DAB digital radio. There was a clear criteria in terms of when that might happen. Things have moved many, many times over

the years, but it would be helpful for the digital terrestrial sector to understand what the Government might be thinking.

Before I turn to the provisions on radio, may I put on record my congratulations to all those who have worked in commercial radio over the past 50 years? Independent local radio, as we once knew it, celebrated its 50th anniversary just a few weeks ago. It was 50 years ago in October since LBC and Capital Radio arrived on our airwaves in the capital, 50 years since Radio Clyde in Glasgow launched and 50 years since BRMB in Birmingham launched. They were the four stations in 1973 that appeared on our AM radios. Over the 50 years, we have seen a plethora of local, regional and national stations arrive on AM, FM, DAB and now online via Radioplayer and smart speakers. Today, commercial radio is delivering record audiences. Back in the early 1980s, we were all convinced that video was going to kill the radio star. Actually, radio is in rude health. We have regional brands, national stations and hyperlocal services focused on their own towns and cities that are doing remarkably well. We should all recognise in this House how strong commercial radio is today and how much we value the services that people who work in that sector provide for us.

There is unanimous agreement across the BBC, and across commercial and community radio, that the Bill, on the whole, works for radio. It contains crucial measures that will help to safeguard the future in the face of changing technology and shifts in listening habits. The radio sector continues to deliver significant public value, providing trusted news, entertainment and—particularly important—companionship for about 50 million listeners every week. UK radio broadcasters make a substantial contribution to the creative industries, and BBC and commercial radio combined generate more than £1.5 billion in gross value added for the UK economy.

I especially welcome the provisions to support the future of the UK radio industry on voice-activated smart speaker platforms, and the removal of outdated regulatory burdens such as music formats on analogue licences for commercial radio stations. When there was a limited number of stations in each market, it was right for the Government to regulate the number of stations that could provide each particular type of service, but today, when there are a great many services, it should be for the market to decide. If country music is not working, it is possible to switch to jazz without spending too much time bothering the regulator.

There are, however, a few parts of the Bill that I should like the Minister to clarify for the industry. Part 5 deals with the safeguarding of local news and information on DAB services, and it would be helpful if the Minister could explain how those powers will work in practice. For instance, how would a multiplex decide which services must carry local news? Would the multiplex owner be responsible for the enforcement against a digital sound service provider, or would that be the responsibility of Ofcom? What would happen if a service carrying local news stopped broadcasting? Would the obligation be transferred to another service holder, or to the multiplex owner? As for Ofcom's new role in producing guidelines for the regular broadcast of local news, can the Minister tell us when and how Ofcom will be consulting on that process?

[*Andy Carter*]

Part 6 contains clauses relating to futureproofing. Will there be scope for expansion of the provisions to cover on-demand and online-only radio content provided by UK broadcasters, as opposed to linear content? Finally, may I ask whether the Government will consider an amendment to protect access to radio in cars, which still accounts for about a quarter of all radio listening, by bringing non-voice activated infotainment systems within the scope of the Bill?

I want to touch briefly on the proposals

“for the repeal of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013”, a decade-old provision that has never been brought into force. While I appreciated the opportunity to observe the perspective of my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), whose knowledgeable account of the forming of that legislation was extremely insightful, I am afraid I disagree with the points that he made. It does not seem right to me that publishers who are taken to court could be forced to pay the legal costs of a judgment if they are not a member of an approved regulator, regardless of whether they win or lose the case. I am a firm believer in the freedom of the press. I have spent time working as a journalist, and there have been times when journalists have written about my activities. There are, occasionally, times when I do not like what the press have written, and there are, occasionally, times when I believe that the press have got it wrong. Healthy democracies, however, need objective journalism which is free from state involvement.

The reason I do not agree with my right hon. Friend is this. The Leveson report recommended a system of “voluntary independent self-regulation”,

envisaging

“a body, established and organised by the industry”

which

“must be funded by its members”.

Lord Justice Leveson said that that body should include all the major players in the industry—national newspapers, and as many regional and local newspaper and magazine publishers as possible—

“although I am very anxious that it remain voluntary”.

George Eustice: What Lord Justice Leveson actually said was that the members of the body would only be recognised as a regulator if they had sought recognition from an organisation called the Press Recognition Panel. Leveson very clearly rejected the model put forward by Lord Black in the other place, for the very good reason that there was no independent accountability and no body to recognise that independent regulator.

Andy Carter: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s comments and I recognise his knowledge in this area. He was involved at such a deep level that he has experience and expertise in this field.

For me, the media regulatory landscape has changed significantly since section 40 was introduced, with the Independent Press Standards Organisation now regulating nearly 2,000 print and online titles, including the vast majority of UK national, regional and local newspapers. I feel that that has left us with an obsolete law on the statute book which was never enacted. Removing the

section was a Conservative party manifesto commitment in 2017 and in 2019, so I welcome its proposed repeal by the Bill.

In concluding my remarks, I want to offer my thanks to the Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), to the Secretary of State and to officials in DCMS for all their positive engagement with me, with the industry and with those in the House who have long been pressing for this Bill to be brought forward. I know that the Minister is just as keen as I am to see the Media Bill on the statute book, and I am grateful to him for taking note of the issues that I have raised today. I look forward to his addressing those issues in his reply, as well as to our continued engagement over the coming months so that we can pass this Bill as soon as possible.

5.41 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter). I remember being warned by the Whips on my very first day in this place, “Do not make the mistake of thinking that the media are your friends. They are not.” I can still remember that. After four years of being in this place I understand the sentiment, but actually we have a job to do. It is to represent our constituents and be accountable, and the media equally have a job to do. As far as I am concerned, we form a relationship with each other, hopefully for the benefit of our constituents. It might not always be a friendship, but in my case it is a decent, healthy working relationship none the less. In North Norfolk we are lucky, because we have some really good local media companies. We have good local TV, good local radio and good local newspapers, and I work with them all. I would like to think that we have a good relationship because I have a job to do and so do they in reporting on my role and what I am doing in Parliament.

We all know that local media are under immense pressure and I have been very outspoken about BBC local radio cuts. BBC Radio Norfolk is a beloved institution in my parts and I still think that those cuts were misguided and wrong. They will devalue the product, push content creators into online from radio and put pressure on our regional newspapers, which are already struggling as a result of the ever-dwindling numbers of people who are reading print content. Local media are often far more adept at reporting on the stories our constituents want to hear, because the regional stories affect the reader directly. Local news programming often aims to be the authentic voice of its viewers and their interests, with viewers often telling stories directly through their own words.

One of the purposes of the Media Bill is supposed to be to ensure that viewing migrating to new streamed platforms does not result in viewing and revenues to public service broadcasting being lost. However, while supporting the largest broadcasters, the Bill does little to protect the rights of viewers to access local news and information on their new TV sets. So for me, the fundamental issue of the Bill is the definition of public service channels. Under the Bill, local TV services are no longer included in the definition, which means that Ofcom will have no power to secure carriage and prominence for internet-delivered local TV streamed services on smart TV sets.

The reality of that is that if local TV services cannot replace lost viewing and revenues, they will ultimately no longer be able to deliver their services. For one of my local TV stations, That's TV, it will have a direct impact on its business. I have always supported That's TV, along with its presenter Charlie Walden and now his successor, Ryan Wykes. Both have been young, talented and keen reporters and I have greatly enjoyed working with them. It is important that they flourish and are not lost, because the demise of local TV would be an irreversible loss to the media landscape.

Where the Bill has got it right is in reducing the regulatory burden on commercial radio stations. They, too, are stretched for advertising revenue but contribute enormously to the rich fabric of community media. To give an example of just how popular local radio is in my region: according to RAJAR data from Sept 2023, 199,000 people across Norfolk and north Suffolk tuned into Greatest Hits Radio, including 18,000 in North Norfolk alone. That is more than BBC Radio Norfolk, at 125,000, and more than Heart Norfolk, at 174,000. That echoes what my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South has just said.

Of all the people listening to the radio in Norfolk, around one in every five listened to Greatest Hits Radio for at least some of the time. It is vital that stations like these are supported and enhanced so that brilliant reporters such as Tom Clabon can continue to report on the latest and most important regional topics, day in and day out. I often find these journalists have a freer rein and more flexibility than journalists from, say, the BBC, with its strict schedule on what they can and cannot report.

One concern is that increasing the visibility or accessibility of public service broadcast content could have an adverse consequence in providing unfair competition to regional newspapers that, as we know, are under great pressure across the country. I am blessed to have a brilliant local newspaper that covers all of my constituency—I know not all MPs have that.

There is almost a clamour to buy the *North Norfolk News* on a Thursday morning, and I pay tribute to up-and-coming journalists such as Adam Barker and the local democracy reporter George Thompson, and not forgetting Stuart Anderson, the community editor, who was the first reporter to interview me after my election. We have worked together productively ever since I was elected to inform the population of all things in North Norfolk.

As I end, I cannot fail to mention protections for non-commercial community radio stations. I have one of the best, Poppyland Radio, based in Northrepps village hall. A bunch of wonderfully energetic, creative and talented presenters and volunteers enable it to broadcast 24/7 but, like every other local media channel, it needs protection to ensure its viability. I hope consideration can be given so that, across the spectrum, it is not just the broadcasting giants that are protected but also the content creators who represent our smaller communities. Without them, the journalists of the future may never be given the opportunity to learn their trade, and then we and the communities we represent would all ultimately suffer.

Thangam Debonnaire: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the House for neglecting to mention at the start of my remarks that I have recently

accepted hospitality totalling £345 from Sky, a broadcaster, to see Madonna—it was unforgettable. I apologise for failing to mention that in my remarks, and I wish to correct the record. I hope that is acceptable. Thank you for your guidance.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for correcting the record as quickly as possible, for which I am grateful.

5.48 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am pleased to welcome the introduction of the overdue Media Bill. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It has been 20 years since the last major piece of broadcasting legislation was passed, and the media landscape has since changed dramatically. In 2003, the words “television” and “radio” described the devices on which we consumed our visual and audio content. Now these formats have taken on a life of their own.

Television can be viewed without a physical TV, and radio can be streamed online. As this technology has evolved, so have the habits of audiences and the competitors entering the industry. In the television space, for example, global streaming services now challenge our public service broadcasters for the attention of audiences. Rather than being linear channels, they offer catalogues of content for the price of a subscription.

Against this backdrop, we are pleased to finally have the Media Bill before us today, in order to give our public service broadcasters and UK radio the tools they need to thrive in the digital era. Just last week, I again met stakeholders from across the industry, including from public service broadcasters, radio providers, online platforms and consumer groups. While not everyone agreed on every detail of the Bill, what was clear from the discussions was the almost unanimous desire to get the Bill through as soon as possible.

Too much time has already been wasted in bringing forward the changes that are needed. Around 18 months ago, Ministers first introduced the “Up Next” White Paper, which contained many of the crucial measures we see before us in the Bill today, including welcome commitments to modernise the public service remit, to ensure public service content is prominent and easy to find on smart TVs and streaming sticks, and to futureproof the listed events regime, so that UK audiences can enjoy important national sporting moments.

However, rather than getting on with providing support for the broadcasting industry, the Government chose to waste a year pursuing doomed plans to privatise Channel 4 instead. Thanks to widespread opposition, Ministers finally made a very welcome U-turn on that proposal. That was a huge relief, not least for those local economies across the country who rely on Channel 4 spending over 50% of its commissioning budget in areas outside London, which the hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) raised some important questions about.

Although I am pleased to welcome the Bill today and look forward to supporting it in its passage, it is vital that the Bill is subject to proper parliamentary scrutiny. Indeed, the Bill has already made distinct progress from its draft thanks to pre-legislative work by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which has rightly received praise from across the House. The Chair, the hon. Member

[Stephanie Peacock]

for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), outlined some of the accepted changes, including creating exemptions to the 30-day requirement, making progress in closing the streaming loophole in the listed events regime and adding much-needed protections to help facilitate a smooth end to Channel 4's publisher-broadcaster restriction.

However, I would like to highlight some areas where clarification may be needed, starting with the first four parts of the Bill, which primarily focus on visual media. It is important that the Bill seeks to ensure that the public service remit is not overly complex or onerous. However, the Voice of the Listener and Viewer, the Media Reform Coalition and the Culture, Media and Sport Committee have raised concerns that removing explicit requirements to cover genres such as entertainment, drama, science, religion and other beliefs could lead to a decline in the provision of content in those areas. Will the Minister clarify what impact assessment the Department has carried out on how the new remit will impact the nature of public service content, particularly with respect to the removed genres?

In the light of changing viewing patterns, it is sensible to provide PSBs with some flexibility to meet their remit through on demand programming, but the Broadcast 2040+ campaign and others have been clear that public service content on linear television must still be protected and maintained. If it is not, we risk excluding those who live in rural areas, do not have an internet connection and an older generation that rely on being able to watch television in its traditional format. Will the Minister explain how the Department will work with Ofcom to hold our PSBs to the highest standards, and ensure that they continue to deliver quality content for as many people as possible?

Further scrutiny will also be needed to ensure the new video-on-demand code is not just a copy and paste of the broadcasting code, and is tailored to the needs of the on-demand environment, a point touched on by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). It must also be clear who this code will apply to. Currently, the Government have said tier one services will be subject to the code, but there is confusion over how tier one will be defined.

Discussions will also be important to ensure the new prominence regime achieves the aim of making sure public service content is easily accessible on smart devices, properly considers how best to implement prominence for the likes of S4C, as raised by a number of hon. Members, and takes into account legacy devices.

On listed events, we need further clarification on how the findings from the Government's consultation into digital rights will be implemented. We do not want a situation where a major sporting event takes place overnight and the next day the online clips are behind a paywall, meaning people in the UK are cut off from viewing it.

Let me move now to the radio-focused parts of the Bill—particularly part 6. I am aware that there has been a wider concern over the drafting and intent of the clauses. Thanks to the occasions that I have been in this Chamber to discuss the importance of preserving BBC local radio, the Minister will be well aware by now that I believe that radio services are of vital importance to people up and down the country. I am therefore also in

full support of the changes that the Bill makes to ensure that UK radio services are available and easy to access, without undue interruption, on devices such as smart speakers.

It is with that support in mind that I wish to ask the Minister how he plans to ensure that these measures are futureproofed, as I know that is something that Radiocentre and the BBC have raised, too. For example, does the Department have any plans to extend the regime where necessary, for instance, to include car entertainment systems? Further, despite the rapid growth of podcasts and online-only radio, these forms of audio are not covered by the Bill's protections. Does the Minister believe that that, too, should be kept under review?

Although I support these measures, I know that the likes of TuneIn, TechUK, and Google, which I met last week, have shared some concerns over this section. Again, I am pleased that the Department has taken on board some of the important recommendations made by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee to ease some of those concerns. However, I would still be keen to hear from the Minister on what work the Department has carried out to ensure that smart speaker platforms are able to prepare internally for carrying radio services through their preferred routes. It is vital that radio is protected in light of changing listening habits, and, in order for this regime to be successfully implemented, there must be proper engagement with platforms and technology stakeholders to ensure that they are able to comply.

Although the Media Bill is overdue and in need of some clarifications and adjustments, I am very pleased to welcome it today. I look forward to working closely with Ministers and Members from across the House on ensuring that we seize this once in a generation opportunity to update media regulation, and create the change needed to ensure the future of our brilliant British TV and radio.

5.56 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (Sir John Whittingdale): May I start by thanking all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate? It has been wide ranging and remarkably consensual with one small exception. Nevertheless, there has been much support for what the Government are seeking to do in this Bill from right across the House. That is perhaps in part because it has been a long time in the preparation, but I think that it is all the better for that. The Government decided to publish the Bill in draft form, and we have consulted very widely since that time.

We are extremely grateful to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, under the chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), and to the Lords Communication and Digital Committee. We have also held extensive discussions with broadcasters, platforms and all those who have an interest including—just to reassure the Father of the House—with Colin Browne of the Voice of the Listener & Viewer, whom I met recently. We intend to continue to engage with all those with an interest in the Bill to make absolutely sure that we have got it right.

A number of hon. Members, in the course of their contributions, remarked on the extraordinary transformation that has occurred in the media landscape

over the past few years. It is absolutely the case that things such as EPGs and linear television are becoming less and less part of everyday behaviour, particularly for young people who access television content. It has meant that there has had to be a succession of Bills to update the legislation to take account of the changes. I have to admit that I was a member of the Broadcasting Bill Standing Committee in 1996. I led for the Opposition in the Committee on the Communications Act 2003, and I am delighted that I shall be taking this Bill through Committee in the next few weeks.

I particularly welcome the offer from the shadow Secretary of State to work with us in taking the Bill through and I look forward to working with her and the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) in Committee as I think that there are areas where we share a common objective. We are also keen to work with all members of the Committee to ensure that we get this right.

As I say, there has been a remarkable transformation in the media landscape. We are particularly grateful for the recommendations, and I want to touch on one or two made particularly by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I have always had a high regard for that Committee, having spent 10 years chairing it. As ever, the report produced by the Committee was extremely valuable and we were delighted that we were able to accept a large number of the recommendations.

There were one or two recommendations on which we took a different view. In particular, one that has been raised by a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Gosport and for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), was the distinction between “significant” and “appropriate”. A number of Members have recommended that we should use the words “significant prominence”, rather than “appropriate prominence”. The Government have taken a different view, which can be summed up as, “Significant can indeed be appropriate, but appropriate is not necessarily significant.”

S4C is an example of that. In Wales, it is very important that it should be highly visible, and therefore significant prominence in Wales is appropriate. On the other hand, it would not necessarily be appropriate for S4C to have significant prominence outside Wales. It should obviously be findable, but it has a different position outside Wales. The Government remain of the view that “appropriate” is a more fitting term than “significant”.

Dr Coffey: I am very conscious of what my right hon. Friend says, but “appropriate” is so wishy-washy and it is clear that promoting S4C in parts of England is not what people are talking about. It is leaving the decision to Ofcom and judges, as opposed to the very clear signal from Parliament that we want our public service broadcasters to be high up the list right across the country, including on the platforms we discussed earlier.

Sir John Whittingdale: As I say, in a large number of cases the appropriate position would be a significant one, but we think there needs to be a degree of flexibility to take account of regional differences, and therefore that Ofcom is perhaps better placed to look at each individual example and decide the appropriate level.

I come to Channel 4, which has featured a lot in the course of the debate. Channel 4, set up by a Conservative Government, has played an extremely valuable role in the broadcasting landscape. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe who rightly said that when Channel 4 was created, the independent production sector did not really exist at all. The indie sector was created by Channel 4 and the fact that Channel 4, as a broadcaster, commissioned all its content from the indie sector.

As a result, we now have one of the most successful independent production sectors in the world, which to some extent does not now need the support of Channel 4; it is making content for all the broadcasters, in this country and beyond. Nevertheless, it is the Government’s decision that, to provide Channel 4 with a more sustainable revenue base moving forward, we should allow it to acquire an in-house production capacity if it so chooses. We talked to the independent production sector at length and felt it was appropriate that in those circumstances we should increase the independent production quota to 35%, in order to provide some underpinning of the independent production sector. We hope that that will ensure the continued sustainability of the independent production sector at the same time as giving a Channel 4 an additional ability to diversify its sources of revenue.

There have been a number of contributions from north of the border during this debate, particularly around Gaelic broadcasting. One measure in the Bill for the first time makes the provision of services in the minority languages across the United Kingdom part of the public service remit. That did not exist before. It is for Ofcom to decide an appropriate level of provision, but there is now a requirement that there should be such provision.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but should there not be something a bit stronger and more stringent in the Bill than a decision by Ofcom further down the road, and should it not be written into law, as several Members have asked?

Sir John Whittingdale: Well, I would say to the hon. Gentleman that clause 1 makes clear that there should be a significant quantity of “audiovisual content that is in, or mainly in, a recognised regional or minority language”.

Kirsty Blackman: Just to correct the Minister, it does not say “significant quantity”; it says “sufficient quantity”, but there is no definition of “sufficient”. We are concerned about the fact that that word has not been defined. We want a reasonable amount of Gaelic content to be available.

Sir John Whittingdale: I apologise to the hon. Lady. She is absolutely right: it does say a “sufficient quantity of audiovisual content”.

That will be a matter for Ofcom to rule on. MG Alba already gets support—

Ian Blackford: I am grateful to the Minister, who I appreciate is trying to be helpful. What we are asking for specifically is that protection in law be given to Gaelic in the way it is given to other languages, such as Welsh. I hope that that can be done with cross-party consensus, which is what we have done over the course of the past few decades in this place.

Sir John Whittingdale: I share the right hon. Gentleman's wish to see continuing provision both for the Welsh language and indeed for Gaelic. I would, however, draw a contrast. Some have suggested that there should be some kind of equity in the support given to the Welsh language and to Gaelic. Of course, S4C receives funding from the licence fee, but that is in recognition of the fact that there are nearly 1 million Welsh speakers in the United Kingdom. MG Alba gets some support from the Scottish Government, which is welcome, but there are approaching 100,000 people in Scotland who speak Gaelic, so there is a big contrast between the two.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: There is a reason there have been so few Gaelic speakers over the centuries: Acts of Parliament, from the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 onwards—and even before. The point is that we are looking for redress and hope, not for more of the same. I mean that in a good spirit; I hope it does not come across otherwise, because I know that the Minister is not that type of person. I am trying to communicate to him the urgency of the real need, expressed by a number of Members, for that kind of support.

Sir John Whittingdale: I am afraid that all I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that the Government recognise the importance of continuing support. We expect the BBC to continue providing a channel in Gaelic, in the form of BBC Alba, and we welcome the fact that MG Alba produces content through an arrangement with the BBC and with the support of the Scottish Government. We have now, for the first time, put into the public service remit the requirement to provide “a sufficient quantity of audiovisual content”.

That is a significant step forward, even if it does not go quite as far as SNP Members would like.

The provisions covering radio have been rightly welcomed and described by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter), who is an acknowledged expert in this area. We have worked closely with the radio sector, and I think that the audio review identified the need to ensure the protection of radio services as more and more people adopt smart speakers.

A number of hon. Members raised local television, of which the Government remain supportive. However, at the moment, local television is not available through apps, so including it in the provisions for prominence was not appropriate, but we will of course keep the situation under review, should it evolve in future. The Government are consulting on the future of local television.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) raised a specific point about the regulation of video-on-demand streaming services. The Government completely share her wish to see adequate protection for children. Having sufficient protections in place will be part of the new requirements on the major streaming services. She is right to praise the BBFC. I have worked with the BBFC for many years, going right back to James Ferman, who for 25 years was its director. It is absolutely true that the BBFC is recognised as expert in this field. I very much welcome that a number of streamers have chosen to adopt the BBFC to carry out their age ratings, including Netflix and Amazon.

The Government's objective, however, is to ensure that protection is in place, rather than necessarily to specify that it has to be done by the BBFC. It will be left

to Ofcom to oversee that, and it already has a lot of experience in this area. It enforces the broadcasting code, which also requires age-appropriate broadcasting. As my hon. Friend rightly said, that was traditionally via the watershed, although that is now changing with the move to on-demand TV. Ofcom also undertakes other protections such as parental controls and so on, so it is not just age rating. I entirely share her view that the BBFC does an excellent job, and I hope that all services will consider using it when reaching decisions, but the Government are not at the point of wishing to mandate that at this time.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I utterly appreciate what my right hon. Friend is saying, and I can see why the Government and Ofcom do not want to be overly prescriptive about how this regulation is done, as long as the content is well understood. Will he just reflect on the fact that this set of labels is well understood by the public? Everyone knows what a U is, and everyone knows what an 18 is. In that sense, it would be an effective vehicle to establish that people understand the content.

Sir John Whittingdale: In determining whether the requirements are met, Ofcom will have to take into account whether the rating is easily understood by viewers. Even if that is not necessarily the BBFC's triangles and particular age ratings, it will nevertheless need to meet those requirements and ensure that viewers can easily see what is an appropriate age for that particular content. I am a viewer of Disney+ along with the other services, and I agree with my hon. Friend. Disney+ has some content that is highly appropriate for children, but it has other content that is perhaps less so.

I move on to the repeal of section 40, which is of concern to a number of Members. I very much welcome the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who served with me on the Select Committee when we carried out the inquiries into phone hacking. I hope I am not being too immodest in saying that the Committee was responsible for exposing phone hacking, and none of the events that followed would have occurred had the Select Committee not persisted in our summoning of representatives of News International, as it was at that time, and pursuing that inquiry. It led to the police investigations and ultimately to the establishment of the Leveson inquiry.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) was right to set out the historical background to the establishment of the Leveson inquiry. However, the one thing that he did not cover, which I recall very well, is that the intention behind section 40 was to put pressure on one or two newspapers that might have been standing out against seeking the approval of the recognised regulator. What nobody anticipated when section 40 was established was that every single national publication would say that they were not willing to comply with that requirement. It was not just the tabloids or the red tops; it was *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and the *Financial Times*. No national newspaper was willing to comply with the Government's proposals under the royal charter, and that did change things, because it made the system unworkable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Rob Butler)—to whom I am grateful for taking over the APPG on media freedom—is right to point out that campaigning

organisations for press freedom such as Reporters Without Borders were equally critical of the Government's proposals on section 40 and have been campaigning for its repeal. The Government reached the conclusion that the system had not worked and should be repealed, and we therefore put that in the Conservative party manifesto of 2017. It was repeated in the Conservative party manifesto of 2019, and I am delighted that we will now put that commitment into effect by repealing section 40.

I have seldom agreed with the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), but on this occasion, I thought he made one or two extremely good points. He is absolutely right to highlight the digital divide. We are very conscious that as more and more people access TV content through streaming services and via the internet, there is a group who have not done so. Several Members asked whether the Government can make a commitment to the continuation of Freeview beyond 2034. The Government would not consider switching off digital terrestrial television unless we had reached the point where the overwhelming majority were no longer using it to access TV. We are very conscious of that group in the population who still rely on traditional Freeview, and that will be in our thoughts.

The right hon. Member was also right to pay tribute to news reporting from around the world and to point out that it does not get enough attention. I was delighted to be able to attend the Society of Editors' media freedom awards recently, where Sky received two awards for its reporter Stuart Ramsay's reports from Myanmar about the civil war raging there. That is a terrible conflict that does not get enough attention. The right hon. Member is right that it is important that both PSBs and other providers continue to bring us reports from right around the world about things that we would otherwise be unaware of.

Lastly, I welcome the right hon. Member's stressing the importance of local newspapers. I have been deeply concerned about the decline of local newspapers for many years. I am delighted that the BBC's local democracy reporting service, which was established following the last charter, continues to support local newspapers, and we continue to look for other ways to support them.

This has been an excellent debate. I look forward to working with all Members and the Opposition as we take the Bill into Committee. I am delighted to commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

MEDIA BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Media Bill:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 14 December 2023.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Mark Fletcher.*)

Question agreed to.

MEDIA BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Media Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Mark Fletcher.*)

Question agreed to.

MEDIA BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Media Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees under the Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(*Mark Fletcher.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

HEALTH AND SAFETY

That the draft Justification Decision (Scientific Age Imaging) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 13 September, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Mark Fletcher.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM

That the draft Immigration (Age Assessments) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 14 September, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Mark Fletcher.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION
UK Meal Card Scheme

6.18 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk. There can be no doubt that we are in the midst of a worsening cost of living crisis, and I fully support my constituents' call for a UK meal card scheme, which would help to reduce household food bills and support local businesses on the high street. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urges the Government to follow the lead of 35 other nations around the world and examine the introduction of a UK meal card scheme to provide a tax-free allowance for employees to spend on ready-to-eat food and non-alcoholic beverages, implemented by updating HMRC’s existing tax exemptions list for employee benefits and expenses, with a graduated tax treatment to ensure that support is targeted at those on the lowest incomes.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the UK remains in the grip of a worsening cost of living crisis, with inflation causing significant pressure on household food budgets; further that there is a need to support companies who are struggling to find workers and to support individuals to find and sustain work, to bolster the UK’s labour market and boost economic growth, and notes that innovation is needed to tackle the challenges we face.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to follow the lead of 35 other nations around the world and examine the introduction of a UK meal card scheme to provide a tax-free allowance for employees to spend on ready-to-eat food and non-alcoholic beverages, implemented by updating HMRC’s existing tax exemptions list for employee benefits and expenses, with a graduated tax treatment to ensure that support is targeted at those on the lowest incomes.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002876]

Scotland:
Further Independence Referendum

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mark Fletcher.)

6.19 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I am going to begin where I left off on 1 February this year when I moved my Scotland (Self-Determination) Bill. It is important to establish how far this Government and the party of opposition have moved from the principle of equity of all peoples of this alleged Union of equals, and ultimately against the democratic will of the people of Scotland. In this place in 1889, the equality of UK partner countries was asserted by none other than William Ewart Gladstone MP, when he said that

“if I am to suppose a case in which Scotland unanimously, or by a clearly preponderating voice, were to make the demand on the United Parliament to be treated, not only on the same principle, but in the same manner as Ireland, I could not deny the title of Scotland to urge such a claim.”—[*Official Report*, 9 April 1889; Vol. 335, c. 101-102.]

That principle of equity was at the heart of my private Member’s Bill, and was again articulated in amendment (j) to the recent King’s Speech, tabled in my name. Each was consistent with the motion passed by this House that endorsed the principles of the 1989 claim of right, which acknowledged

“the sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of Government best suited to their needs”.

However inured this House has since become to the aspirations of the people of Scotland to live in a normal independent country, support for independence is holding steady at around 50% without a single leaflet being dropped through a letterbox. That number is rising steadily, and will continue to climb. The independence genie is not for going back into the bottle.

Of course, that growing support requires a mechanism through which to express its effect and place beyond doubt the will of the people. My Scotland (Self-Determination) Bill is explicit about the conditions necessary to bring that mechanism into play, and is clear that the power to legislate for a referendum requires a democratic mandate from the Scottish public. Since 2014, that criterion has been met in successive general elections to the Scottish Parliament, most recently in 2021, when a majority of MSPs were elected on a manifesto commitment to deliver an independence referendum. This evening, I intend to set out how that must now happen, and how it can be put beyond the wiles of intransigent London-led parties for good.

One of the most invigorating aspects of the 2014 independence referendum campaign was the explosion of interest and engagement in all aspects of policy, and the healthy workplace, coffee house and pub debates across Scotland. Back then, as a movement, we were unafraid to have differences of opinion and to propose various solutions to decades-old problems. Most importantly, we spoke truth to the distortions of the Unionist Better Together “no” campaign. That appetite for truth and facts is something we must rediscover. Our movement must demand that if we are to make progress towards independence.

The first issue we must come to terms with is that another section 30 independence referendum is not going to happen for the foreseeable future. As a consequence

of the Scottish Lord Advocate's folly in arguing a poorly crafted question, the UK Supreme Court made it clear that in the absence of an equitable mechanism for self-determination across these islands—such as the one I have proposed—any referendum on Scottish independence is a matter reserved to London.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Ind): In some ways, the Supreme Court's judgment was perhaps helpful. It said in paragraph 81—this is the reason the Court stopped the referendum—that even if the referendum did not have any legal powers, because the UK Government had not signed up to it, the ballot box would carry authority, which would force the UK Government to recognise that authority and therefore cause a change to the Union. By stopping the referendum, the Supreme Court has now opened another avenue for Scotland, which we will maybe touch on later. That, of course, is using elections.

Neale Hanvey: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and that is a key element of my contribution to this debate.

Put plainly, a section 30 order to temporarily transfer those powers to the Scottish Parliament is entirely in the gift of Westminster. That underscores the unavoidable truth that our Parliament is in reality part of the fabric of the British state and is increasingly being squeezed under the heel of Whitehall. Securing mandates to ask for a referendum on independence only to be rebuffed is now the equivalent of Monty Python's parrot that has ceased to be. It is as stone dead as a mandate can be. The Tories have become increasingly bolder in this regard, and while they persist with their assertion that this is a voluntary Union, they refuse to set out the means of withdrawing consent. This Government have also made it clear that they will plunder Scotland as a cash cow until the wind stops blowing. Westminster plans to rob our resources at its leisure. There is no way, even if the First Minister were to ask, that the Prime Minister would agree to an independence referendum in his final months in office.

In a Westminster Hall debate on this subject, the Minister responding this evening claimed that “the benefits of being part of the United Kingdom have never been more apparent.”

Where is the benefit for the one in three households in Scotland living in fuel poverty? Where are the benefits for the north-east of Scotland when the Acorn carbon capture and storage project still waits for a go-ahead from the UK Government? The Minister proclaimed that Scotland has

“one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world.”—
[*Official Report*, 30 November 2022; Vol. 723, c. 384WH.]

But Scotland remains powerless to stop the plunder.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): When the hon. Member speaks about opportunities to improve the lives of people in Scotland, we could of course do that through our NHS, through our education system, through our justice system and through local government. All of those issues are devolved fully to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, but they are of course ignored by the SNP and Green Government—the nationalist Government—because they are always focused on independence, rather than on the real priorities of the people of Scotland.

Neale Hanvey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I would be the last person to speak for the SNP Government in Scotland. I refer back to my party leader's excellent tenure as First Minister, and the meaningful difference he made to the lives of the people of Scotland.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: This comparison with a devolved Scotland in the United Kingdom is as silly as comparing the performance of Northern Ireland and Stormont in the United Kingdom with Dublin and an independent Ireland. Ireland has a €10 billion surplus this year, rising to €20 billion next year. The UK, with a deficit of around £170 billion, is unable to build small hospitals on small Hebridean islands, whereas Ireland is funding nurses over the border.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I am not sure who the hon. Gentleman was intervening on there.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I was extending the debate.

Neale Hanvey: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am equally—
[*Interruption.*] Yes, my hon. Friend has put the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) in his place.

Anyway, the Treasury is happy to siphon off £11 billion in tax receipts from oil and gas this year alone, and we are sending south 124 billion kWh of energy, which is enough to power Scotland's needs fifteen times over. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) set out in a Westminster Hall debate this morning, with this Union it is all pooling and absolutely no sharing. I ask the Minister: where is the evidence of a share of Scotland's energy bounty?

As for an incoming UK Labour Government, now bedecked in Union Jackery—the Tories will like this bit—the Leader of the Opposition has made it clear that his priority is continuity with Tory economic and social policy, and he intends to continue London's plunder of Scottish assets. Do not be confused: it was British Labour that first hid the truth of the McCrone report from the people of Scotland—a truth kept secret by successive Labour and Tory Administrations for 30 years. Neither party has protected our economy or our communities, so why should we trust any of them now?

They each may persist with the claim they have
“no selfish strategic or economic interest”

in the north of Ireland, but we know the opposite is true of Scotland, where the strategy is wholly economic and top-to-tail selfish.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sitting here as a determined, strong-willed, proud Unionist who believes that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is always better together. Northern Ireland is part of that, and I very much wish to see Scotland be part of that, so the hon. Gentleman and I will disagree. Does he accept that when it comes to the British Government, the amount of money that comes from here to keep Scotland going can never be ignored? He talks about the trade downwards, but the trade is also upwards and that cannot be ignored when it comes to the financial implications. Better off together, always.

Neale Hanvey: The hon. Gentleman hit the nail on the head when he said that we will absolutely not agree on anything he said.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: In answer to that point, the Republic of Ireland is costing the UK nothing after leaving, therefore if Scotland goes it will save you a fortune—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Stop intervening on Mr Hanvey to intervene on the person who intervened on Mr Hanvey.

Neale Hanvey: You can't knock his enthusiasm, Mr Deputy Speaker. Neither the Labour nor the Conservative parties have protected our economy, and any fantasy that pleas for more devolution will be accommodated by Labour are pie in the sky. North of Tyne Mayor Jamie Driscoll recently accused the Labour Opposition of censoring, diluting, and striking down key recommendations contained in a report by former Prime Minister and MP for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, Gordon Brown, on the constitution and further devolution across the UK. Those forlorn attempts to prevent the "Break-up of Britain" by refusing to devolve power away from London will serve only to boost the case for Scottish independence. Mr Brown's attempt to reframe the debate to one of

"change within Britain versus change by leaving Britain"

has been utterly dismantled by his party leader and increased the urgency for independence. All that leads us to the position where Scotland urgently needs a robust strategy that not only deals with the facts of the day, but overcomes that central Westminster hurdle of the denial of a democratic process.

The Alba party, and our Scotland United colleague, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), believe that every single Scottish and UK general election must now be used to secure majority support for independence negotiations to commence. That could, and should, include the triggering of an early Holyrood election.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Member has hit the nail on the head. The referendum door is slammed shut, and there are three ways that the SNP Government at Holyrood could trigger a plebiscite on Scottish independence. Of course, the resignation of the First Minister was very awkward and difficult, but a majority of two thirds of MSPs can vote, or by using section 31A of the Scotland Act 1998 the two-thirds majority can be altered to a simple majority. That was not communicated properly in light of the Supreme Court, and those who did not communicate it properly should have set the record straight or at least apologised. I think they should set the record straight so that MPs, MSPs and the wider public clearly understand that point.

Neale Hanvey: I thank my hon. Friend for that important piece of information. It underscores that there is need for much more robust and firm action from the Scottish independence movement, to push forward the case for independence. As I said recently, independence will not fall into our laps. It is something that we have to pursue with vigour and absolute determination.

That approach reinstates the position of the national movement prior to devolution. As with all democratic expressions, the threshold would be a simple majority of votes cast for all independence parties—a threshold that was achieved on the last list vote for the Scottish Parliament. That approach is supported by the expert legal opinion I obtained from highly distinguished academic and legal practitioner in international law, Professor Robert McCorquodale. He said that

"the people of Scotland are distinct within the UK and have a right to self-determination.",

and subsequently that

"the right to self-determination applies to the people of Scotland."

He went on to state:

As the people of Scotland are a people for the purposes of the right to self-determination, they can exercise it. The choice of the means to exercise it is for the people to decide and not for the state."

Furthermore, he explained that the UK, as a signatory to multilateral international human rights treaties, has

"expressly accepted that the right to self-determination is a human right"

and

"not just as an international legal principle—which is binding under international law on all states."

These are not obscure or arcane points of law; they are precise and purposeful.

I understand why the UK Government do not want to hear the facts that Professor McCorquodale set out, but I cannot comprehend why others are steadfast in their refusal even to acknowledge that landmark legal opinion charting the correct lawful and democratic course to self-determination and independence.

The Alba party's amendment to the recent King's Speech repeated the democratic principles contained in my Scotland (Self-Determination) Bill for the recognition of the right of the people of Scotland to self-determination by amending the Scotland Act 1998. That would transfer the power to legislate for a Scottish independence referendum to the Scottish Parliament.

Let me deal with the supposed gold standard of a section 30 order. Such an order on its own is not a gold standard; it was the process of negotiation and agreement that led to the signing of the Edinburgh agreement that was the gold standard. Let me be clear that any democratic vote in favour of self-determination is the only standard required, providing that that is the clear and unclouded purpose of any such vote—unless of course the UK Government do not want to recognise democratic elections as legitimate expressions of the will of the people.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Member is making an excellent point. An unscheduled Holyrood election would precisely be in that category. It would make the world stop for a moment and see whether Scotland was to choose independence. That power rests with MSPs at Holyrood if they want to do that.

Neale Hanvey: The hon. Gentleman is making really important and valid observations. Those are the key tactics that we need to adopt.

Whichever UK Prime Minister comes next, while they may have every technical right to stifle, subdue or ignore the Scottish Parliament, the British state has no locus to limit the inalienable human rights of the people

of Scotland or the march of our nation. Yet in this Union, that is precisely where Scotland finds its democracy—denied. That flies in the face of commitments given. In Margaret Thatcher's memoirs, she said of Scotland:

"As a nation, they have an undoubted right to national self-determination".

John Major, when Prime Minister, said of Scotland that "no nation could be held irrevocably in a Union against its will". The commitments contained in the Smith commission's agreement, which was signed by all Scotland's main political parties, said that

"nothing in this report prevents Scotland becoming an independent country in the future should the people of Scotland so choose."

Scotland will only ever become an independent country as and when the majority of the people of Scotland choose that path, yet that requires a democratic mechanism that is constitutional and satisfies international legal precedent. From Gladstone to Thatcher, no one until now has had the gall to seek to constrain the Scottish people's democratic right to self-determination. I have made this point many times, but it bears repeating. Democracy is not a single event; it is a continually evolving process that demands opinions be tested and retested regularly.

I anticipate that the Minister will reel off the usual rebuttals and crow about how we have had a referendum, but he should know this. As an option, a referendum has been put beyond reach by Westminster and Whitehall, but Scotland will adapt. Each and every election from hereon in can and will provide a platform on which the people of Scotland can have their say on their consent to this Union. Consistent with Professor McCorquodale's opinion, that would pave the way to where

"a clear majority of people representing Scotland... indicate their approval"

for independence,

"but it should not be done by the Scottish Parliament, as the latter is within UK domestic law. This could be done, for example, through a convention of elected and diverse representatives from across Scotland with a clear majority in favour."

Scotland's separate constitutional tradition is best summed up by Lord Cooper, in the case of *MacCormick v. Lord Advocate*:

"The principle of the unlimited sovereignty of Parliament is a distinctively English principle which has no counterpart in Scottish constitutional law."

The UK Government face a choice: give serious consideration to bringing forward legislation for an equitable mechanism for self-determination, as exists on the island of Ireland, or face that test at every election in future. In international law according to human rights declarations, the decision on Scotland is the purview of the people of Scotland, not of any London party. In the constitutional tradition of popular sovereignty in our great country, it is the people who remain sovereign, and it will be the people of Scotland who decide.

6.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (John Lamont): Yet again, the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) has decided to use valuable debating time in this place to focus on the constitution. Yet again, this time could have been used to raise issues of immediate importance to Scotland's future. Yet again, his constituents, and my constituents in the Scottish borders, will be disappointed.

The Government's position on a further independence referendum is well known.

Neale Hanvey rose—

John Lamont: I want to make some progress, and I will give way another time. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member has only just sat down, and I will deal with his points in due course.

People across Scotland rightly expect to see both their Governments working together. Our relentless focus should be on the issues that matter to them, their families, and their communities. Scotland's bright future as part of the United Kingdom is better served by focusing on tackling the cost of living, and on growing our economy so that everyone has access to the opportunities, skills, and jobs that they need. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members on the Opposition Benches shake their heads, but I know that those are the priorities of my own constituents in the borders. It is disappointing how disconnected those Members are from the priorities of the constituents they represent.

When it first came to power, the SNP set out to emulate the Labour party of old, and it certainly has succeeded. The nationalist movement is now even more divided than the far left. The SNP and Alba compete to see who can be the most reckless in their demands. They are constantly trying to get one up on each other on independence. But it does not matter who is pushing separation—Humza Yousaf or Alex Salmond. Scotland does not want it.

Unlike the divisive nationalists, we Unionists on the Government Benches are all about bringing people together. As hard as it might be, let me try to find a point of unity with the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath. Perhaps we can agree that Scotland wants to be free—free of the SNP. As a member of the Alba party, surely he can agree that we are fed up with Humza Yousaf, Michael Matheson's ever-changing stories and their endless incompetence and deceit.

While Scottish Conservative MPs are securing millions of pounds-worth of investment in our constituencies through UK levelling-up funding, elected members of the hon. Member's party want a giant independence thermometer to be constructed somewhere in Scotland. I wish I was joking. The independence thermometer is the brainwave of the Alba party's most recent recruit from the SNP, Ash Regan MSP. Personally, I would rather see taxpayers' money spent on schools and hospitals, but if the hon. Member insists, will he tell us where he wants the independence thermometer to be located? Has he lobbied the Chancellor for funding for this ridiculous proposal? Will the thermometer be made of mercury, or is that where he got the idea from—another planet?

Neale Hanvey: I thank the Minister for giving way. However, I need to go back to my first request for an intervention. He was complaining about using valuable time in the Chamber for a debate on the constitution, but it is his Government who are finishing early! It is his Government who have just launched a new King's Speech and cannot fill the parliamentary programme with enough business to keep the Chamber going. I hope he will correct the record that it is not me who is impeding Parliament doing its business; it is a lack of action from his own Government.

John Lamont: What a load of baloney! This Government have an action-packed programme set out in the King's Speech. We have an ambitious programme for Scotland and all parts of the United Kingdom. We are focused on the issues that matter to the communities we represent, not on endlessly debating another independence referendum.

The UK Government remain as determined, focused and committed as ever to getting on with the job for the people of Scotland. That is best demonstrated by what we are doing on the ground. The UK Government are delivering £2.7 billion of levelling-up investment across all parts of Scotland. As hon. Members on the nationalist Benches know, that investment includes: £1.5 billion for 12 Scottish city and regional growth deals; £160 million for two investment zones in the Glasgow city region and north-east Scotland; £52 million for two freeports, focused at the Inverness and Cromarty Firth and Firth of Forth regions; and £817 million for locally-driven plans and priorities, regenerating town centres, improving vital infrastructure, supporting businesses, and spreading skills and opportunities to communities everywhere.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for giving way. He mentioned the Unionists on the Conservative Benches. I am a Unionist on the Opposition Benches, as are my party. It is clear that the polls in Scotland are indicating less of an interest in independence than there was. Is that because the realisation of those in Scotland is that they see their future within this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—better together? Is it because the financial benefits of Westminster and the Government here to Scotland, and indeed to Wales and Northern Ireland, are so good they would never really want to leave?

John Lamont: The hon. Member makes very valid points, but the key point is that support for independence and another independence referendum in Scotland is falling. The voters in Scotland, certainly in my constituency in the Scottish Borders, are getting wise to the failures of the Scottish SNP Government in Edinburgh, and they recognise the benefits of remaining part of a strong United Kingdom. That is because the UK Government and the Scottish Government are working together on so many areas to make our communities better—driving economic growth, supporting the Scottish economy and delivering for Scotland.

I can give some further examples. We can see it through the Scottish Seafood Industry Action Group, where the UK Government regularly engage with the Scottish Government and the Scottish seafood industry to consider a range of important issues, including access to labour, energy costs and export opportunities. We see it through the fiscal framework review, where the UK and Scottish Governments reached a fair and responsible agreement. Both Governments reached a compromise for the benefit of the Scottish economy, while keeping us on track with our fiscal objectives. And we are investing more than £100 million in Scotland's innovation economy through the strength in places fund and Glasgow innovation accelerator. Our close collaboration with the Scottish Government in this area was further underlined by the agreement signed between UK Research and Innovation and Scottish Enterprise earlier this month, which aims to streamline innovation support for Scottish businesses.

Levelling up is already making a real difference to all regions of Scotland. It is bringing advanced manufacturing jobs to the Glasgow city region, data driven innovation jobs to south-east Scotland, and life sciences jobs to the highlands and north-east Scotland. It is saving the community on Fair Isle with a new ferry, bringing Clydesdale horses back to Pollok Country Park, and revitalising town and city centres from Greenock to Aberdeen, and Cumbernauld to Elgin. It is helping communities to protect and restore their treasured buildings and facilities, whether it is the last pub in Lochranza on Arran, or a permanent home for St David's brass band in Gorebridge. *[Interruption.]* The Members on the nationalist Benches shout those initiatives down. This is funding from the United Kingdom Government going into communities the length and breadth of Scotland—something that they seem to strongly oppose. I am disappointed by that and I know the communities they represent will be disappointed by it too.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Before the Minister gets down to the mugs and glasses that we provide for the cub scouts, along with any other crumbs from the table, let me make this point. He mentioned “two Governments” in Scotland. What inefficiency! Norway, Ireland, Iceland and Denmark have one Government each, and they are outperforming Scotland in the United Kingdom. If Scotland is doing so well in the United Kingdom, why do Norway, Ireland, Iceland and Denmark not want to join the UK? It is because they know that it is not a good place to be. They look at Scotland and Wales and they see places that are doing better, just as they are doing better. If the campaign for Scottish independence is doing as badly as the Minister says, why not hold your referendum now? You'd win, surely, wouldn't you? But you know full well that when the Scottish people engage, independence will happen!

John Lamont: The hon. Member speaks of “crumbs from the table”, but this is significant investment going into communities across Scotland. Scotland is receiving hundreds of millions of pounds through our levelling-up agenda and a record block grant amounting to more than £40 billion, but SNP Members oppose and fight every bit of the investment that this United Kingdom Government are making there. I am saddened by that, and I know that the residents and communities that the hon. Member and his colleagues represent will also be disappointed by the hostile and negative response to investment that has been used to improve the communities that we represent.

Together, the UK Government's interventions will drive innovation and long-term economic growth, restore pride in place, and help cities, towns and villages in every part of Scotland to flourish. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath referred to

“the sovereign right of the Scottish people”

to determine their future, and I suppose that that reference to self-determination gets to the nub of the debate that he has initiated. In 2014, the year of the referendum on Scottish independence, there was consensus between the UK Government and the Scottish Government—both Scotland's Governments—and there was consensus in civic society in Scotland and consensus across the population of Scotland, which is why both Governments

agreed to the referendum. The ultimate act of self-determination, of course, came in September 2014, when, in record numbers, the people of Scotland turned out to vote to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend has given a strong defence of the Union, as he always does in his ministerial role and on behalf of his constituents. Would he agree that the nationalists have had more plans for Scottish independence than Michael Matheson has had excuses for his £11,000 iPad bill? And just like that £11,000 iPad bill and their different plans, none of them are honest, none of them are convincing and none of them have the support of the Scottish people.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We hear about plans for referendums endlessly from SNP Members. I just wish they had a clear plan for ferries in Scotland or a clear plan for Scotland's NHS and Scotland's schools, but no—referendums, referendums, referendums are all we hear about and all they talk about.

I would like to finish by reminding those on the nationalist Benches yet again that our different views on the constitution should not distract both of Scotland's Governments from working together to tackle the sheer challenge of delivering growth, easing pressures on the cost of living and supporting the NHS. The Scottish Parliament is one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world, and we believe that the devolution settlement strikes the right balance. This United Kingdom Government are committed to devolution, and we are working collaboratively and constructively with the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, to deliver better outcomes for the citizens of Scotland and the entirety of the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

6.53 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 November 2023

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

International Men's Day

9.30 am

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered International Men's Day.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, especially after all the work that you, Mr Davies, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) have already done on this subject. We are here to celebrate International Men's Day, which took place on Sunday 19 November. It is a day to celebrate all the good that men have done, but also a day to shine a light on the things that adversely affect men so much.

The theme this year was suicide. Thirteen men a day take their life. Thirteen men who woke up yesterday morning are no longer with us—and today, another 13, and tomorrow, again, another 13. Every day, every week, every year. Just let that sink in. Thirteen men, every day, think the only out is to take their life. In 2023, that cannot be right, can it?

What is the answer? Sadly, there is no silver bullet, but there are steps we can take—steps we must take—and suicide is not the only issue affecting men, so I am going to take us through a few of them but then through some solutions too.

Let me start by taking us through a boy's life. Let us call him Tommy. Tommy never asked to be born—none of us did—but Tommy is here. Tommy needs care and attention from day one, not just from mum at home, but also from dad. Human interaction is crucial to a child's development. Playing peekaboo is, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) said, so much more important than we would think.

Sadly, Tommy's mum and dad argue a little too much. Money, housing, health, work—there are so many things that make relationships hard. We know that life is not easy; that is why marriage vows have, for centuries, included the words, which we all know, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Tommy's parents separate. Sadly, too many times, it turns into a battle. In come the solicitors. To win their case, too many use blame as a tool, a child as a weapon. The legal system makes it so hard for children. Lawyers want to win at all costs, parents say things that should not be said, and the truth is often embellished on all sides. An acrimonious split is achieved. Tommy now does not see dad, and Tommy's mum now has it all to do. Not work, rest and play; just work, then work at home, and then little sleep for Tommy's mum.

What of Tommy's dad? Dad is ousted from the home, unable to see his son. Many fathers are prevented unfairly. There is child maintenance to be paid; the Child Maintenance Service presents another challenge. Tommy's dad often turns inwards and often to the fridge, looking for relief. It could be beer, the wrong food, both—or worse.

Little Tommy gets a PlayStation and a smartphone. The world wide web influencers now come into play in Tommy's life. They want to sell a brand and themselves; they have no care for what little Tommy sees. Tommy's schoolwork suffers. There are no male teachers at his school—there are very few male teachers now—no role models to follow other than the wrong ones. There is a decreasing number of positive male role models on TV. Tommy plays up at school. Nobody expects anything of him—written off at such an early age. Knowing this, Tommy plays up even more. One day, he finds himself excluded from school. Tommy becomes easy prey. A local gang shows him respect for now, shows interest for now. Antisocial behaviour follows: disrespect for police, drugs, a knife, a spell inside. Mum is in despair. Where did it go wrong?

Tommy's father is now probably overweight. He is drinking too much, has anxiety, no sense of value and feels that he has nothing to live for. Sadly, Tommy's dad becomes another statistic; one of the 13 a day who die by suicide. Tommy finds a girl amid this car crash of a life. They want to make a go of it together. They have a beautiful little boy—Tommy junior—and, sadly, the cycle begins again. That is quite depressing, but we all know that it is true.

It really does not need to be like that. As I said, there is no silver bullet, but there might be something close. Let me go through this and show how it cuts across all Departments of the Government. Tommy's first 1,001 days are so important. We need to push the family hubs out across the country as soon as possible—Department: Work and Pensions.

Keeping families together saves so much pain and heartache, and saves the state so much money. Some 66% of mums want to stop at home and look after their child. We need to offer them the same support that we offer mums who want to return to work. Mums have a genuine choice; we need dads to have the same choice. We need to build many more homes where people need them. That way, we will have more choice, which will automatically raise the standard. We also need a fairer tax system for families—Departments: DWP, Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Treasury.

To stop the hate and separation, we need a new model when it comes to family law: fairness for fathers, as well as for mothers, and a system that treats fathers as equally in practice as it does in theory. What works in civil litigation does not work here. Little Tommy needs mum and dad, so that has to be the starting point of any separation—Department: Justice.

Influencers need to understand their audience, and the damage that they can do. We have to get them to quit being a problem. The Online Safety Act 2023 will help, but we cannot legislate for people being decent, just as we cannot legislate to force people to be kind. We need to name and shame the culprits.

We need leisure centres and youth clubs. Tommy missed out again yesterday in Edlington; there is no leisure centre for Tommy, so he spends 14,000 hours on his games console, like the average boy does up to the age of 21—Departments: Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and DLUHC.

There are four million children living with only one parent. In 88% of those families, the parent with care of the children is mum. If we assume an even distribution

[Nick Fletcher]

in family size, we can estimate that around 3.52 million children live with their mothers; that is 1.76 million boys without a dad at home. We need to introduce and maintain a flagging system in schools that flags fatherless boys as they start secondary school. All boys need mentorship and to be met with a positive attitude. Fatherless boys need that especially—Department: Education.

When it comes to stopping gangs, the police's Operation Duxford is working, but we need to do more. We need a zero-tolerance attitude and a broken-window strategy, so that our young people know how to behave. The gangs must be dealt with from the bottom up. Capturing the ring leader is not the answer; he is often replaced within an hour, once caught, so we need to stop his workers on the street—Department: Home Office.

On a quick side note, tags are a deterrent to others, as well as to the one who is tagged. One young man told me that, when he had to wear one, all of the individuals who might have dragged him back into crime actually kept away. They did not want to be with him, because they could be traced. Through being tagged, that young man has been able to leave criminality behind and is now back on the straight and narrow.

I will get back to the Departments. Separated dads are often unable to spend time with their children. They are in despair, and we need to do more to help them. Men may often turn to the wrong lifestyle choices when things are not right. We have an NHS system that does not fit around the patterns that men often work. We need men to discuss their issues, become part of a community, feel valued and have access to their kids—Department: Health and Social Care.

I have listed many Departments, but there are issues for men who work that are covered by so many more. I have heard of loneliness in occupations. With regards to suicide, lonely farmers are a concern. Spending long days in tractors on their own is no good. Isolation is hard to cope with—Department: Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The soldier who leaves the forces and cannot find his way in civilian life on civvy street is another concern—Department: Defence.

The list goes on, and many Departments are doing much to help. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and Ministers both past and present, have been amazing. They have been listening. Just this weekend, they announced help with issues that so many men face: prostate cancer screening, access to health services online and a taskforce to understand how men access physical services. All of that is good to hear. These steps will undoubtedly save many lives, and it goes further.

The announcement of a men's health ambassador is great news too—a huge stride forward. We have a Minister for women, and she is doing great work, but if we want to help all the men and boys such as Tommy with their poor life prospects, we must do more. If we want to stop men such as Tommy's dad taking their own life, and to give Tommy's mum a life that is not just sheer hard work for seemingly very little return, we need a Minister for men and boys—a Minister who will connect all the dots and join all the Departments together, who will take men's health and wellbeing seriously, and who will ask the following questions whenever any

policy is announced: how does it affect men? How does it affect their families? How does it help society as a whole? As Warren Farrell states:

“When one sex loses, both sexes lose.”

That is very true.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for presenting a very well-researched speech and for telling us the story of Tommy. Does my hon. Friend believe that it would be a major step forward to have a Minister for men?

Nick Fletcher: Yes, I do. That is what we are building up to, and we desperately need it.

I thank the Minister for everything she has done, but she should use her influence to inform our Prime Minister about the debate and give him this message: no matter how many men there are around his Cabinet table, or how many men there are in the boardrooms of FTSE 100 companies, men still need help. She should tell him not to forget little Tommy. Trust me, he is desperate. Whether he is five, 15 or 25, he is desperate.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): My hon. Friend has made a passionate case for why young boys need very strong male role models. I would argue that young girls and women need those strong role models too. I entirely support his call for a Minister for men, but would he take this opportunity to congratulate A Band of Brothers, a group in my constituency that provides male mentorship? It has seen incredible, inspiring, transformational success in the lives of the young men it has come alongside. That essential ingredient, role modelling, by a more experienced and mature man, has truly made the difference.

Nick Fletcher: I could not agree more. Girls need role models too, which is so important. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys, and as a Member of Parliament who takes this issue so seriously, I ask my hon. Friend to pass on my thanks to the charity for all the work it is doing.

I am the biggest believer in personal responsibility. Not everything can or should be down to the Government, so I ask the nation to talk up men. I ask the nation to look for the good in them. I ask the nation to ask them if they are okay. When they say they are fine, ask them again. Many men are not fine; they need our help and support. Look out for the little Tommy in your community. See if you can be of help to him through his mum or his school. Trust me, if we do not do so, the 13 suicides a day will not stop at 13. The figure will rise, the prisons will only get more full, and too many more women and girls may be hurt along the way.

In conclusion, when the subject of a Minister for boys and men is mentioned, stop sniggering and start supporting. We need to quit being part of the problem and start being part of the solution, because when one sex wins, both sexes win.

9.45 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not often I get called first; I appreciate the opportunity. It threw me, but I have read my notes and know what I am going to say. I congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on setting the scene so well. He touched on some of the things I wish to speak about: suicide

rates, prostate cancer and loneliness. I live on a farm on the Ards peninsula, so appreciate and understand how isolation and loneliness can play a big part in farming communities, simply because of what the job entails. Very often there is the farmer and his dog or his animals; interaction with other people does not happen.

In setting the scene, the hon. Gentleman used the illustration of young Tommy. I know that young Tommy does not exist, but there are young Tommies out there across the community who do. He illustrated that very well with that example and I commend him. It is great to be able to speak in this debate. November is an important month because we can raise awareness of men's health and wellbeing, particularly mental health and testicular and prostate cancer.

The occasion also gives an opportunity to lead by example, as World Children's Day is celebrated on 20 November. Having the two sit so close together is a fantastic way to encourage good moral values and responsibility. It is good to talk about these issues in a constructive and positive way. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, as she understands the subject well, and I hope she will give a positive reply to our questions. I also look forward to hearing from the two shadow Ministers. I know their contributions will enhance and enliven the debate, as will others. I am conscious not to leave anybody out.

I want to comment on important statistics related to men's health. Figures from AWARE NI state that suicide is the leading killer of men under 50 in Northern Ireland. That is a sad reality that nobody wants to think about. Not long ago we had a spate of suicides in my immediate town of Newtownards. They tended to be young men in their early twenties, which is discouraging and worrying. I remember when one young fellow committed suicide, a number of his circle of friends did likewise.

There is the key issue, which is not the Minister's responsibility, but adds to the debate. I am sure the examples and evidence I give from Northern Ireland will be replicated across the United Kingdom. One in three men in the UK have had suicidal thoughts due to stress. It is no secret that many men view depression as a sign of weakness, choosing to ignore the symptoms. I hope that would not be the case, but recognise that it is. Perhaps the Minister could give us some thoughts on how we can better reach out to those men, to ensure that the stigma they worry about does not drag them down.

Many see the stigma attached to opening up and asking for help. The phrase "man up" is not meant in a derogatory fashion, but as a prompt to strengthen oneself. The fact is that it talks people down, and I think it is wrong to say that when it is taken too literally. Men then suppress their anxieties and try to deal with them inwardly, even when they are not able to. I see no shame in asking for help and I encourage men everywhere to do that. International Men's Day is the time to reinforce that point.

I referred to life in the rural communities, simply because we are a country of small farms. Some of them are run as one-person businesses, and at others the wife looks after the house and also helps on the farm. Lots of the interaction is very isolated. Funnily enough, yesterday morning someone came to my office—I will not mention her by name—to talk about the problems

she is experiencing as a result of rural isolation. The issue applies to both men and women, but I wanted to dwell on it in this debate about International Men's Day.

I have known a few people over the years who, if we met them today in any company, we would think that they were the life and soul of the party. But the thing is that, when they leave that party and that group of social friends, when they get home and close the door, they are a different person. We should not always think that the person who is jovial, funny, talkative and laughing all the time has no problems, because it is possible that they do.

Samaritans has found that men who live in rural areas are less likely to seek mental health support, and due to the nature of their community they are more likely to feel isolated. At half-past 11 there will be a Samaritans event on suicide prevention in, I think, Speaker's House. If Members are available, I suggest that they try to get along to that. As someone who represents a partly rural community and who lives in a rural area, I know that this is an incredibly important issue, and I encourage anyone who is feeling confined or isolated not to be ashamed of seeking help.

The same point can be made for veterans too. I wish to underline the issue for veterans separately, because I deal with veterans in my offices every day. The veterans charity Beyond the Battlefield is based in my constituency and its incredible work reminds me of what has been done for former service personnel suffering from PTSD and poor mental health due to the nature of their service. I work with many charities, but I want to mention two in particular in my constituency. I have been involved with Beyond the Battlefield since its inception. It provides accommodation and has applied for another grant through the Ministry of Defence's veterans scheme. If successful, it will be able to provide more beds to people.

The second charity is SSAFA—the Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Families Association. Every one of us of a certain generation, and perhaps more, will know about SSAFA. I hold a coffee morning for it every year, and this year I think we left with £5,800. That is for coffee, tea and sticky buns, so it really is quite an achievement. People are very generous, and it is quite clear that they give more than what they would usually give for a bun and a cup of coffee.

Karl McCartney: One of the reasons I am standing here is that the hon. Member for Northern Ireland, as many of us think of him, has made some very valid points, including about Samaritans, which has a direct link to my constituency of Lincoln. I do hope to see some Members at Mr Speaker's event later this morning. We are commending International Men's Day, and the hon. Gentleman has made some very good points regarding suicide and other issues, but I wanted to stand up so that he did not feel alone. We all know that he intervenes on many of us when we make speeches, and I wanted to return the favour.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Yes, we all share many things in common, and we are here to contribute to the debate in a positive fashion. This House can shine and reach out in a way that is necessary in the society we live in.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I am very conscious of time and that others also want to speak, so I will not go on much longer. Queen's University Belfast has a prostate cancer centre of excellence, and I mention that because it recognises that prostate cancer is a killer. The hon. Member for Don Valley referred to that in his introduction, because he recognises, like I do, that there is not a full understanding of what it means to men. If someone has a wee problem, they might not do anything about it and say, "Well, sure, I'll get better by the end of the week," or, "I'll get better in a fortnight's time." But they do not. I commend Queen's University, and I look forward to visiting that centre of excellence shortly.

On International Men's Day, the Government have joined Prostate Cancer UK to unveil a £42 million screening trial to find ways of detecting earlier the UK's most common cancer in men. When we see that somebody does something good, I commend saying something good about it. There are many times when certain things will happen that we are perhaps concerned about, and we will not register them. The Government have made £42 million available for that purpose—well done. They have recognised the issue. The Minister might comment on that when she speaks later.

That will allow hundreds of thousands of men across the country to participate and remind other men that they are not alone. It is really good that the Government have put their hand in their pocket—on behalf of us all—and made this happen. Thousands of lives could be saved. May I seek clarity from the Minister and ask whether the money will be extended to the devolved nations as well, and whether this issue is devolved? We cannot leave the men of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales behind.

To conclude, let us use this day to duly celebrate the men in our community and the contributions they make. Hon. Members here will know that when it comes to men's issues, I am here in this House to speak for them, and I do it every time. Today the debate is about International Men's Day, so I want to make a plea for them. I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley for raising this issue today, and for reminding us that we should always encourage and support emotional stability for everyone out there who is suffering.

9.56 am

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, in this debate on International Men's Day. It is a particular pleasure to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for securing this debate, and for making such an important contribution.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the way in which gender stereotypes are harmful to men and boys. Issues include family breakdown, excluded boys being drawn into antisocial behaviour, drugs and crime, and men's attitudes towards seeking help not just for mental health but health per se, as well as a legal system that too many men feel militates against them, particularly when it comes to family law. I would argue that gender stereotypes, in all their forms, are harmful to human beings, and my hon. Friend made a very cogent case for the way in which they are harmful to men and boys.

I listened very carefully to my hon. Friend's policy suggestions. I would suggest that if men and women had equal voices at the policymaking tables, we could ensure that the lives of both men and women could be seen in all the policies that come forward in this Parliament. If we encourage male Ministers to do as much as they can, and particularly to look at their female counterparts and the work they do on how gender affects policy, that could go some way towards addressing some of the issues that he is talking about.

It is not good for men if the health system is designed for men, because men have daughters, partners and mothers. We want all our public services to work for men and for women. If we currently have a system where that is not the case, we need to encourage all Ministers—whatever the Prime Minister might decide on a Minister for men—to think about the gender differences that are at play. It is not only the Minister for Women who thinks about Government policies and how they affect women. Many of my female colleagues who are Ministers do a huge amount to think about how their policies will affect women. Perhaps their male counterparts need to be doing similarly.

In Parliament, we make policies and law for people—few are gender specific. But we know—as my hon. Friend has just said—that men and women experience the world very differently. That is why I really welcome this debate on International Men's Day. As right hon. and hon. Members might know, I often lead the debate on International Women's Day. That is an opportunity to celebrate the contribution of women, but also to raise a lot of the issues. This debate is just as important, because it reminds us that we live in a gendered world, and we have to deal with that as politicians. We do not make the best policies unless we recognise that there is a difference.

I am sure you will not be surprised to know, Mr Davies, that I would love a world where gender is no longer an issue that drives the sort of differences that my hon. Friend just talked about, but we deal with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. He is absolutely right that we need to consider gender when we develop policies. Chromosomal difference, although significant, is not really what he was talking about when he set out the parameters of this debate; those differences are added to by societal norms. We could have an enormous debate about nature versus nurture; I would say that nurture plays a huge part in many of the issues that my hon. Friend clearly articulated.

International Men's Day is not only about the issues that I will come to in a moment; it is about celebrating the men in our lives and the amazing contribution men make. Men shape our lives, whether we are women or men. My father told me to go to the best university I could, and that my imagination was the only limit to my achievements—crumbs, that is a fantastic role model to have. It is about my brothers, my husband and my sons being there; such are the people who shape our lives. There are far more men in my life than women, although I give a special call-out to my daughter and mother, because they are very special too. Men are there to shape our lives, and I do not think there is anybody in this Chamber who would argue differently.

All the evidence shows—my hon. Friend made this point—that men's and women's lives are different. We should be concerned about the pressures that men face,

including the pressure to conform to notions of masculinity, which I would argue are very out of date. I hope my sons do not feel that pressure, but I am sure they do. I do not want their childhood to be filled with phrases such as, “Don’t start acting like a girl.” I hope that is in the past, but perhaps it is not. To be branded as the breadwinner in adult life puts huge pressure on men. In reality, one in three women earn more than their partners or husbands, yet society still sees men as the breadwinner. We treat each other differently because of our gender, and the evidence shows that, as a result, we live different lives.

In the UK, we find gender a difficult concept. That came out in the trans debate recently. It also came out in 2013, when many people found it quite difficult that the Government said it was wrong for the state not to allow people of the same gender to marry. I was the Minister at the time, and we changed the law to enable that to happen and for it to be a happy occasion.

That we continue to have a gender pay gap clearly shows that society treats men and women differently, and too many boys are still being told to “man up” during their childhood. We treat men and women differently. I do not think that is right, and the world would be a better place if we outlawed those sorts of gender stereotypes.

Nick Fletcher: My right hon. Friend is making a very good speech. She mentioned the gender pay gap, and I keep hearing this all the time. Will she confirm—she has an awful lot of experience of that issue—that it is illegal for anybody to pay a man more than a woman to do the same job?

Dame Maria Miller: I think my hon. Friend is probably thinking about something different. The gender pay gap is about looking at groups of people who earn differently for doing the same thing in their workplace. It is not about pay levels—pay rates for the individual. If my hon. Friend looks at the data available now, he will see that the gender pay gap has actually disappeared for groups of men and women in their 20s and 30s, and quite remarkably it reappears vigorously over the age of 40. When companies look at what they pay groups of people who are over the age of 40, they will see that women are paid less. I wonder why that is. The average age of giving birth is now around 30—it is a lot older than when I had my first child. It is women who are finding it very difficult to come back into the jobs market and get jobs that are actually comparable with their qualifications. There is also an issue around productivity there.

This debate, however, is not about women. It is about men and we should focus on International Men's Day. In this day and age, I think that most men want to see fairness at work and, if they have a female spouse, for them to be paid fairly. I do not think that this is necessarily about men wanting to gang up on women. It is societal structures and norms that are causing the problems. We, as politicians, have a great deal to do to reset those societal norms and to ensure that the structures do not create a perpetuation of gender stereotypes, which, as my hon. Friend set out, are so harmful, particularly to men and boys.

I think that Brits are far less comfortable than our continental friends in agreeing that inequality between the genders is serious. There has been some research done to suggest that, in continental Europe, one in three

sees gender inequality as a serious concern, whereas in the UK that figure is one in four. Perhaps, as a society, we need to challenge ourselves a bit more on these things.

As both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have said, the way in which our public services are structured, in terms of perpetuating some of these gender stereotypes and inequalities for men, is best seen in our health service when it comes to men's health. It is quite concerning that men are expected to live almost three years less than women, which is extraordinary. It is even more extraordinary that I do not really see a policy to directly address that. There are some policies there and, of course, the Minister has huge expertise as a Health Minister, so she will turn to matters such as the prostate cancer work being done.

Cancer rates are 20% higher among men, and men are more likely to go to hospital with heart disease, more likely to smoke, more likely to die from alcohol conditions, more likely to use illegal drugs, and more likely to die in a workplace accident. The Government do have policies, but are they really focused on the disproportionate way in which those issues affect men? I think they probably do on heart disease, and obviously they do on prostate cancer—although, again, there are issues for trans people, particularly trans women, in accessing those healthcare systems.

In terms of men's mental health, there is an increasing gap between men and women. As my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley said, suicide rates among men are a concern. In fact, they are not just a concern; we have seen that women's suicide rates have halved and men's suicide rates have fallen just a fraction. Again, I challenge the Minister to ensure that we have a gendered approach to healthcare in our country.

Let us not pretend that there are no differences between men and women—there are. I would like to see a world where men and women are recognised for their separate needs and one where we celebrate our differences, but our aim should be to remove that difference when it is destructive, to enable us all to live in peace and prosperity together. That is the way in which we are going to have the best world possible.

10.9 am

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on how he approached this topic and for his powerful speech. Men do face critical challenges because they are men—and young boys too—whether it is about mental health, violence or family breakdown. Too often this debate is seen as if there has to be an equal ledger of suffering before we will acknowledge those challenges. We do everybody a disservice if we ignore those concerns in favour of culture war arguments about whether James Bond could be a woman or whether Andrew Tate is what every man would be if they could get away with it, or if we simply snigger. I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in so many ways, and I am so pleased to see him here today and able to contribute.

I want to take up the hon. Member for Don Valley's challenge and talk up a particular group of men for which the term is too often loaded with negative

[Stella Creasy]

connotations: dads. It is such an important role, but so often the butt of a joke: deadbeat dads; absentee fathers; daddy daycare; dad bods; dad jokes; sugar daddies; baby daddies; “Who is your daddy?” Our images of fatherhood are rarely ones we would wish people to replicate. Think of those famous fathers: Darth Vader; Homer Simpson; Phil Dunphy in “Modern Family”; Kevin in “Motherland”; Don Draper; Uncle Phil in “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air; Jim Royle; “Citizen Khan”; Logan Roy; Tony Soprano; Frank Gallagher—thank God for Bandit in “Bluey”. If they are not trying to take their kids over to the dark side or bullying them into a life of crime, the message is overwhelmingly that the mental load of parenting is something mothers deal with, while dads are hapless, indifferent, sidelined or, at best, cash machines.

However, a wealth of evidence tells us that dads spending time with their children leads to better outcomes. If children spend more time with their fathers at the age of nine months, by the age of three they show more positive emotions. Increasing a father's role in a kid's life leads to higher educational attainment and lower behavioural difficulties for both boys and girls in primary school. Indeed, the educational effect is even more profound when it comes to maths—something I know the Prime Minister is concerned about—regardless of gender, ethnicity, age in the school year, or household income. But a recent study in Scotland showed the challenge: a quarter of working dads said that they were “almost never” satisfied with the amount of quality time they got to spend with their kids—a pressure that is particularly profound for fathers of very young children.

We spend so much time in this place telling women how to be good mums. On International Men's Day, it is time we redress the balance. The secret is that it is the same for both parents: it is about being present for kids, day in, day out, every day and all day. That is really hard in a country that does not talk about it—especially when it comes to dads—let alone value it enough to make it financially possible and socially acceptable for all.

I want to thank all those leading the change and leading the charge for fathers: Elliott Rae and the amazing MusicFootballFatherhood; Street Fathers, led by Colin James, which is helping young men make the transition from boyhood to manhood in my constituency; the Men's Sheds project, which helps dads and men to connect and talk; the Fatherhood Institute, MANUP? and CALM for the work they are doing to tackle male mental health challenges and the dad stereotypes that the hon. Member for Don Valley set out.

Our men and boys and what they need from their dads are at the heart of so much in our society. They need dads of the involved kind—not the controlling kind, the violent kind, or the absent at work kind. The kind who does not turn around 20 years later to say, “I was away so much when my kids were growing up. I don't know them at all.” Not the ones who say, “Ask your mum,” rather than asking themselves how they could do something and role-modelling it for their kids.

For that to become the norm, we need a Government and a country that does not think that is woke, but wise. But the last time Parliament debated how to support fathers was in 2019. The word “patriarchy” is on the record more times than “paternity”; it is a word we do

not refer to unless we are talking about the Father of the House. Yes, we have a women's mental health strategy, and that is very welcome, but as the hon. Member for Don Valley pointed out, we do not have a men's mental health strategy. The Government's own childcare strategy only talks about how it would benefit mums. The hon. Member for Don Valley is right: we should be asking how it benefits both parents. This year, the Government published a written ministerial statement pledging to make it easier for fathers to take flexible leave and parental leave, but that did not make it into the King's Speech—unlike pedicabs.

Today is chance for us to collectively to reclaim “dad”; to challenge the idea that men are too stupid, too weak, too absent, too deadbeat; to help the dads working three jobs on poverty pay, never getting to see their kids grow up; and to help them be the dads that our kids, our country, and their mental health need them to be.

I have a very simple start for the Minister: how can we actually make parental leave work for dads? We know that one in 10 women experiences post-partum disorders and depression, but actually one in 10 dads experiences post-partum anxiety, which starts when the baby is born and does not stop. A 2008 study found that lower levels of cognitive development in children were associated with having a depressed dad. We should want to tackle men's mental health problems in their own right, but also recognise that by doing so and being explicit about it, we will also help many more people around them.

So many dads are not spending the time they want with their kids because they just cannot afford to do so. More than three times more women than men claim parental leave pay. On average, new fathers take just two weeks—the statutory minimum entitlement—which is a pitiful amount of time to be able to bond with their child. That amount of leave increases only among the very wealthy. Only men with a household income of £200k or more take an average of 10 weeks.

Dame Maria Miller: It is interesting that the hon. Lady has brought up the amount of time that men take off for parental leave. There is also data that would suggest that even when more paid parental leave is available, it is not taken up because of a fear that both men and women feel: if we take time off around pregnancy, we are in some way letting people down. The hon. Lady, as somebody who has had children, may recognise that. Men feel the same way. It is more than simply having that offer of money; we also need an attitudinal change towards people taking the time off in the first place.

Stella Creasy: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Lady, whose remarks prefigure mine. Money does matter. When 43% of men say that financial hardship prevents them from taking additional leave, it matters what they get paid, in the same way that when women do not get proper statutory maternity cover, it affects our decisions. However, we also know that 17% of men cite pressure from their employer. Women's careers get written off; men's relationships with their children get written off. Nobody is winning in our current environment.

We need to increase the amount of time men are entitled to, but we also need to change the way we do this. We need to stop it being about men versus women and share the cost. I hope the right hon. Member for

Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) will agree that it is about time we stopped making this issue something that just the mum's employer has to deal with. If we want shared parental leave, we should share the cost of providing parental leave between both the mum's employer and the dad's employer so that everybody has a vested interest in helping to support that family, ensuring that the employers who benefit from it also contribute to it. Let us be honest: the dad's employer benefits when the mum takes on the load.

Let us end the mum penalty that means women feel their careers pay the price. Let us challenge the idea that men taking care of their children and stepping up to share that responsibility is something shameful that they should do in such a way that nobody notices they are gone.

The hon. Member for Don Valley is also right to say that it is not just about financial cost. Elliott Rae has a fantastic campaign about "parenting out loud". Women know that when they do that, they get judged; men need to do it to show a different way forward. What does he mean by parenting out loud? Rather than hiding parental responsibilities, men in leadership positions should talk about those responsibilities and role model how to combine them with the work they do, whether that is leaving work to go to a school parents evening or working from home to help to cover doctors' appointments.

That is why when Ministers attack working from home or flexible working, it is not just mums whose opportunities they are closing down, but dads—as well as the next generation—who miss out on the impact of the extra hours they could spend with their children without having to commute. The good news is that we have empirical research on that. During the pandemic, men doubled the amount of childcare they were doing. The Fatherhood Institute recognised that it would take double that time—an extra eight hours—to get the same benefit of the father-child relationship. Parents can either spend two hours on a train getting to and from work or two hours helping our child to learn to read. I know which I think would be better for economy, better for their mental health and better for our society.

Whenever we take our vision of fatherhood from those value it least, men miss out. We would not frame our debate about financial exclusion based on the antics of Bernie Madoff, so why do we let those men who boast that they have never changed a nappy or that they were in the pub when their kid was born decide how dads rear their children? We should stop lauding men who do anything as if it is a surprise and they should be congratulated. They are the men who want a medal for taking their child to swimming. Instead, we should start asking how men can be the dads they want to be—present and equal in looking after their children, 24 hours a day, day in and day out—because that is what it takes to raise a child who will thrive. When we do that, the evidence is that it is good for men's families, men's relationships and our economy. On this International Men's Day, we should finally let dads be dads.

10.20 am

Cherilyn Mackrory (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for securing this incredibly vital debate

and for the way that he set out little Tommy's life, all the issues that can spiral out of control, and the cycle that can go on and on if we do not do something about it.

I will take the time to thank the two men who are closest to me in my life at the moment. First, I could not stand here today were it not for the help that my husband gives to raise our daughter while I am 300 miles away for half of every week. If he was not being the kind of dad that the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) just described, I would not be able to do this job; indeed, if other men did not behave similarly, other women would not be able to come forward and enter this place.

Also, I thank my dad. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer less than a month after I came to this place, so I want to put out this message to all men—please, please, please take advantage of the screening programme that is coming, because the only symptom that my dad had was a bad back. He had tests and went to chiropractors for a couple of months, before finally going for an MRI scan. It turned out that the cancer had spread and he was in really bad shape. There but for the grace of God go we. He has now gone into complete remission and is doing very well, thank you very much, but that is more through luck than anything else. I pay tribute to the fabulous care that he received from the Royal Cornwall Hospital, but on another day he may not have been so lucky. Please will all the men who are listening to or watching this debate take advantage of all the tests that they are offered.

As many people know, I chair both the all-party parliamentary group on women's health and the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, so a lot of my work in this place is about ensuring that women are listened to, certainly during maternity care and when they experience the other health issues that women face. I absolutely welcome all the work that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), has done in this place.

Through representing the beautiful constituency of Truro and Falmouth and living among all the men and women there, I see men from all kinds of industries and family structures working absolutely tooth and nail for their loved ones. It is vital that we work to level the playing field, and highlight that work, with the same vigour for men as we do for women.

Going back to the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about loneliness in rural communities, loneliness is absolutely front and centre in Cornwall. We sadly hear all too often that somebody has ended their life because of it—not only farmers, but fishermen as well. Fishermen often spend days at sea by themselves. Even if it is just for a couple of days, they are pressurised because their career, their job and their livelihood are so weather-dependent. There is nothing they can do if the weather is not on their side—they literally cannot bring in a wage—and that pressure often means that fishermen turn to alcohol.

One of the things that I wrote to the Chancellor about ahead of the autumn statement was the importance of the village pub. This is going to sound quite strange, but if a man is going to turn to alcohol because of the pressure he is facing, I would much rather that he was in his village pub, with a crowd of people that he knows well and that know him well, than going to the supermarket night after night, picking up a bottle of something and sitting alone at home to drink.

[Cherilyn Mackrory]

There are lots of reasons why I want to support village pubs, but that one is so important, even if it is something that we just do not talk about. I hope that if anybody is listening to this debate today, they will consider why, for many reasons, it is important to keep village pubs open and look kindly on that campaign. They can be an actual lifesaver.

Through chairing the APPG on baby loss, I know that the focus is often on our talented healthcare professionals, and the Government home in on the mother giving birth. It is easy to forget the broader picture and the role of the entire family unit, especially when we lose a baby and the whole family grieves. It will not come as a surprise to colleagues to be told that the tragic loss of a baby for parents anywhere in our country has a long-lasting and horrific impact on fathers. When it comes to baby loss, our partners are our rock; they are the only person who know exactly what we are going through.

Sadly, a couple who suffer such a loss are 50% more likely to end their relationship within six months than other couples are. Keeping partnerships strong, open and resilient requires, in my opinion and—sadly—experience, a support network outside the relationship, which must come from friends and family. And it often has to provide long-term support to both parents, to preserve the mental health of dad as well as mum. People often forget to ask about how dad is doing after he has lost a baby. People are concerned because mum has given birth and her body is recovering. She is obviously in pieces and does not know where to go. People often look to dad to support her, but he is grieving for his child as well, and we must never forget to ask how dad is doing.

I have championed that principle in my constituency. I am proud to say that our new women and children's hospital at the Royal Cornwall Hospital in Truro will have facilities on site that will benefit fathers. Examples include simple things such as ensuring spaces are available for parents to say goodbye to their lost babies away from wards where successful births are taking place around them. We need to ensure adequate space for dads on our maternity wards, and Cornwall will be at the cutting edge of that. Support will be provided to parents at the start of the pregnancy. When babies are ready, we will have the best caring facilities to reduce baby loss. Aftercare will be there for young families having children, and support will be available to parents if it all goes wrong.

I take this opportunity to signpost some of the support that is already out there for dads suffering after baby loss. I have worked closely with the charity Tommy's. For the past few years, it has had an absolutely brilliant—in my opinion, the best—website. It outlines groups and methods that can help men through this particularly tragic form of grief. It has a direct nine-to-five hotline to a midwife. They will talk through concerns and disruptive thought patterns with any dad wanting clarity or answers to their trauma and can recommend that parents reach out to their GP for support through this stage of their life.

The risk of developing PTSD, depression or anxiety increases hugely following the loss of a child, and it is vital that we as Members ensure that both parents get

the support they need to fully recover. As my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley said, if a man is a veteran or has had a tough upbringing, such a loss can compound all their experiences; it could be the thing that tips them over the edge.

We also need a proper understanding of workplace rights, as men may need to take time out of work to fully come to terms with such a traumatic loss. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has details of counsellors trained in supporting men through baby loss. Maternity Action has information about miscarriages, stillbirths and neonatal deaths, and explains how to take time off to deal with experiences of them.

In our experience, it is often that a man sees a pregnancy as a pregnancy until the baby is a baby. I do not think that is a failing; pregnancy is just something that happens to women's bodies, so we often have a different way of looking at it. It is important that all the questions that men have when something goes wrong, or even when there is a potential that something could go wrong, are answered by someone without putting extra pressure on the relationship.

The Baby Mailing Preference Service is brilliant. It can reduce the number of baby-related mail that a man or woman encounters. There is plenty of support out there, but we have a long way to go before these sources fully enter the mainstream and people do not have to go looking for them when the worst happens. I would like mothers, fathers and other birth parents offered bereavement counselling at all NHS trusts as part of the national bereavement care pathway. Under my predecessors, the APPG on baby loss was vital in getting the national bereavement care pathway up and running. We know that it still is not working as it should in all trusts, but we can improve it. Counselling is the thing that we absolutely need to provide.

When it happened to us, my husband got on his boat, turned his key and went straight back to work, and I do not think that was the healthiest way for him to process what had happened. Everyone acts completely differently. We must ensure that the counselling that a man or woman needs is there, and that includes relationship counselling. If there is a sibling, it is even more important that mum and dad can process their grief—whether together or separately—and that they stay together for the long term.

It is important that we find examples of good practice and ensure that they are replicated all over the country. If there are fathers out there who have had good experiences or have suggestions about mental health in this space or the support they received after losing their baby, I would love them to come forward to the APPG so that we can work with them and our partners—Sands, Tommy's and the Lullaby Trust—to ensure that, on this International Men's Day, dads are not forgotten, and that we raise the issue and stimulate further action to improve support for fathers.

10.29 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate to mark International Men's Day 2023. I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) not just for securing the debate, but for the sensitive way that he drew out some very important issues that too often get buried under

other matters that we discuss in this place. It is important that we continue to talk about gender equality, equal pay and the pension gender gap, but that does not mean that we cannot be cognisant of and exercised about the very important public health and social challenges that face men and boys. There is no doubt that those challenges and issues exist.

The theme of International Men's Day 2023 is "Zero Male Suicide", and that is where I want to focus my attention. The need to help men and boys cope with and understand mental health issues is beyond urgent. As we have heard, the overall suicide rate is 13.9 per 100,000 people—a similar figure to previous years—but male suicide rates are still three times as high as female rates, and in Scotland, 556 men died by suicide last year. Behind every statistic lies a family torn apart and a life that ought not to have been lost.

Suicide is the No. 1 killer of men under the age of 45 in the UK. It kills more men under 45 than car accidents, cancer, drug or alcohol addiction, or any other issue that can end lives. The fact that men take their lives by their own hands in such numbers is truly heartbreaking. We can wring our hands, but there must be something more we can do to reduce those awful statistics. Key to that is seeking to understand why so many men resort to suicide, which is a terrible last act of despair.

One explanation that many point to is the fact that males have traditionally not been expected to admit when they are finding life difficult. A number of Members have talked about the awful expressions that are often used, including "toughing it out" and "manning up", which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) first mentioned. As a result, men and boys often find it hard to admit when they are struggling and need support, and that can only undermine their mental health and increase their sense of isolation. Problems mount up, but they feel it is weak if they admit it, ask for help or simply need a chat to share their concerns and process their feelings. Instead, they are much more likely to internalise their feelings, which often detrimentally impacts their relationships with their family members and friends—their children, their wives and their extended social relationships.

How we as a society adjust our expectations of men is important. It is okay for someone to admit that they are struggling; it is not a sign of weakness. As boys grow up and develop in their homes, families, schools, workplaces and universities, we need them to learn that they will sometimes need support and that there is no stigma attached to talking to someone if they are suffering. In fact, it is perfectly normal, and actually it could be seen as a sign of strength. If we cannot get men and boys to open up and share their worries, concerns and problems with those closest to them, or a support organisation if that is easier for them, we are unlikely to make a meaningful dent in those awful statistics. Each number is a family torn apart—a life lost that could have been saved.

Although we know that suicide is the biggest cause of death in males under the age of 45, we also know that when it happens, the loved ones left behind are often bewildered. They often did not see it coming. For the rest of their lives, they are left with questions—"What did I miss?", "Could I have done something to prevent

this?", "Why did they not talk to me?" That is why suicide does not just take lives but tears families apart and leaves wounds that truly never heal.

I pay tribute to the wonderful UK Men's Sheds Association. In my constituency, I have seen at first hand the fantastic work undertaken by the Three Towns Men's Shed, which serves Ardrossan, Saltcoats and Stevenston, and the Garnock Valley Men's Shed, which serves the towns of Kilbirnie, Beith and Dalry. In these sheds, men get together to offer each other friendship, camaraderie and a sympathetic ear. They share practical skills, experiences and problems, and provide a shoulder for each other when times are tough. Men helping each other in their communities is what a men's shed does at its best, and it is not overstating the case to say that men's sheds have the potential to transform and save the lives of the men who join them.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right to underline the issue of men's sheds. I can think of four men's sheds in my constituency: in Saintfield—I see them on the third Saturday of every month—Portaferry, Newtownards and Ballybeen. Those four men's sheds have saved lives, which is what she is referring to.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am delighted with the men's sheds in my constituency, because the three towns in the Garnock valley are post-industrial areas with great socioeconomic challenges. Sadly, we know that people who are socially and economically disadvantaged are also those at higher risk of suicide and at higher risk of developing mental illness. Middle-aged men living in the most deprived areas face an even higher risk of suicide, with rates of up to 36.6 per 100,000, compared with 13.5 per 100,000 in the least deprived areas.

The changing nature of the labour market over the last 60 years has particularly affected working-class men. With the decline of traditional male industries, they have lost not only their jobs, but a source of masculine pride and identity. We also know that men in midlife tend to remain overwhelmingly dependent on a female partner for emotional support, but today, men are less likely to have one lifelong partner and more likely to live alone, without the social or emotional skills to fall back on. Undoubtedly, loneliness is a significant factor in many male suicides; it puts men's suicide risk at a higher level. Men's sheds can truly mitigate that and help men to strengthen their social relationships.

I will briefly mention the impact of allotments. In my constituency, we have the Elm Park allotment in Ardrossan and the Kilbirnie allotment on Sersley Drive, which allow men to get out into the open air and forge friendships. Otherwise, they may be sitting at home, watching the telly and becoming catatonic with loneliness. At the allotments, they develop relationships with other volunteers in a very healthy outdoor environment. In my view, things that build the social fabric of our community, and which help men get together, save lives.

Cherilyn Mackrory: I think the hon. Lady answered my point. Does she feel, as I do, that the way in which society is driving more and more people to be isolated at home with screens, rather than to be out in a community and speaking to other humans, is not healthy? It may end up exacerbating the problem.

Patricia Gibson: Indeed it does, and men are particularly prone to isolation. Women are much more likely to make friendships and chat to people—men not so much.

The value of men's sheds and allotments cannot be underestimated. On their own, they are not a silver bullet—nothing is—but we are looking to use every tool in our armoury to tackle the terrible phenomenon of male suicide. The Scottish Government provide a lot of support for men's sheds but, as always, I would like to see more. There is never enough, especially given the transformational power that men's sheds and allotments have.

The idea of a Minister for men has been mooted today. Given what we know about the suicide statistics and men's health, I do not think that the idea should be dismissed. It should be actively explored.

It is very important that we have acknowledged and marked International Men's Day. I know some people do not think that such a day matters, which is part of the problem. We need to acknowledge that our fathers, brothers, sons and husbands can struggle and feel unable to admit it. I agree with the hon. Member for Don Valley that it is in all our interests—it is in the interests of girls, mums, wives and sisters—that men and boys feel supported and fulfilled, so that they can have a true stake in the future and, in turn, become better role models for their sons. International Men's Day gives us the chance to set time aside specifically to show that the male suicide and public health problems that we see need not happen. A much-needed light must be shone on the importance of men and boys asking for support. As we know to our cost, too often the lives of men and boys depend on it.

10.39 am

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I know that you have done a lot of work in this area, having secured the first International Men's Day debate in 2015.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing the debate, and I thank him for championing this important issue and for his work with the APPG on issues affecting men and boys. He spoke powerfully about how suicide impacts on men and took us on the journey of Tommy's life to talk about how he had been affected.

I am pleased to close this important debate for the Opposition and to have the opportunity to speak on International Men's Day and mark the occasion in Parliament. I begin by thanking several hon. Members who have spoken. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about Northern Ireland and highlighted the slow diagnosis of prostate cancer. He also talked about loneliness in rural areas.

I thank the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), who said that she wants all services to work for women and men. Both the hon. Member for Strangford and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke talked about how the use of language and perceptions sometimes have an impact on how men and women are treated, giving the example of the words "man up".

My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) talked about images of fatherhood that are used in ways that we would not like to replicate, about

how the mental load of parenting is often something that mothers do, and about equal parental leave.

The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) has done a lot of work as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss. I thank her for sharing her personal story again; she has been a trailblazer in this area. She talked about how the tragedy of baby loss has a long-standing impact on fathers as well as mothers, which is not always talked about. She also talked about making sure that there is adequate space for fathers at maternity wards.

As the name indicates, International Men's Day is a worldwide celebration of the positive contribution that men bring to their families and communities. It is only fitting for me to thank all the incredible men who inspire and uplift others and promote a fair and inclusive society for all. I know that I have a number of male allies and that I would not be in this place today if they had not played a key role in supporting me. However, this annual event is also a crucial moment when the public come together to say that our men and boys face extreme challenges. These include the high rate of male suicide, shorter male life expectancy, falling educational standards among boys compared with that of girls, and so much more. We must also not neglect to mention the shocking inequalities that often leave minorities and the least privileged men in our society most vulnerable. Those are big challenges, but ones where progress can and must be made.

Figures on men's mental health in the UK continue to show that suicide is the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50. The Minister may remember that, in my first Health questions in my current Front-Bench role, I raised the issue of men aged 45 to 49, who are at most risk of suicide. However, we know that suicide affects the young as well.

Although it does not always come down to one factor, men can face specific life events that may increase their risk of suicide, including the breakdown of relationships, loneliness, unemployment, alcoholism and financial difficulties. Some of these contribute to the sad fact that the poorest in our society are more than twice as likely to die from suicide compared with the wealthiest. It is also important to mention that young black men are around three times more likely to present with suicidal risk. Research has found that gay, bisexual and trans men are even more prone to poor mental health, substance misuse and self-harm. I hope we can all agree that much needs to be done to support men who are struggling in crisis, because around three quarters of the deaths from suicide each year are men. As has been mentioned, men are less likely to seek help. If they do not seek help, they are less likely to get the help they need.

I want to commend a few charities doing fantastic work in this space by providing community support, especially for middle-aged men. They include James' Place, the Men's Sheds Association, Andy's Man Club and Second Step's Hope Project. I also want to mention Tommy's, raised by the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth.

Although suicide is extremely complex, it is preventable. The Opposition believe that we must shift towards a system that focuses on prevention. The high rate of suicide is a haunting indictment of a lack of early

intervention and support. For example, it is shocking that patients across England waited a total of 5.4 million hours in A&E while experiencing mental health crises last year. It is further shocking that 1.8 million people are on the NHS waiting list for specialist mental health treatment, and those numbers are growing only higher.

A Labour Government will treat mental health as seriously as physical health. Our mission will be to get the rate of suicide down. If we are privileged to get into Government, we will do that within our first term. Our plan will also include recruiting more than 8,500 more mental health professionals to cut waiting times for treatment. We will provide access to specialist support in every school and every community. We will open mental health hubs for young people. Labour has a plan and mission to build an NHS that is fit for the future and there for when people need it.

I turn to the many concerning disparities in men's physical health. It is important to note that men have a shorter life expectancy, as has been mentioned, with one in five dying before the age of 65. We know that those deaths could be prevented by diet and lifestyle changes. Men are disproportionately affected by heart disease, and more men than women are overweight or obese.

As with mental health inequalities, when comparing life expectancy, there is a stark inequality between the most and least deprived areas of the country. In England's most deprived postcodes, life expectancy for men is 73.5 years compared with 83.2 years in the least deprived areas. Despite that, men are still less inclined to seek help or advice from medical professionals, and therefore do not get the help they need. Without regular health check-ups, serious issues can go untreated for longer, and sometimes it is too late.

When instances of cancer are 21% higher for men than for women, we know how important early intervention can be. We also know about the well-recognised high rate of prostate cancer among black men. When the cancer is detected, patients must get the treatment they need, yet year after year, the Government have failed to meet the cancer waiting-time targets. Missing target times means missing lifesaving cancer treatment.

We need a strategy that is focused on early intervention and ensures that people receive the care and support they need. Instead, the Government have chosen to cut public health budgets substantially across the country. A Labour Government will invest in a bigger than ever expansion of the NHS and look to improve the cancer survival rates within five years by hitting all NHS cancer waiting times and early diagnosis targets, so that no patient waits longer than they should.

We will also tackle the stark health inequalities faced by disadvantaged groups. We have committed to a fit for the future fund to arm the NHS with state-of-the-art equipment and new technology to cut waiting times. That means doubling the number of CT and MRI scanners and getting people diagnosed earlier.

Of course, we cannot discuss men's health without looking at boys' performance in education. In basic terms, boys perform worse than girls by the end of primary school, with 70% of girls reaching the expected standard in maths. The disparity is even more acute among those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with disadvantaged white boys being the least likely group to

go to university. Children only have one chance at education, and reducing those disparities with early intervention will make outcomes better.

I will conclude by repeating what I said at the start of my remarks. While we have spent most of today's debate on the areas of most important concern, this occasion should also be a moment of celebration. It may be obvious to say this, but we all know that men—including you, Mr Davies—provide an invaluable contribution to our families, communities and society. This occasion should be one of appreciation as well as awareness, and I am glad to have had the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

10.51 am

The Minister for Women (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. May I start by saying how pleased I am to participate in today's debate? The theme of this year's International Men's Day is "zero male suicide", which was touched on in many contributions today and is something that I am passionate about in my role as mental health Minister. I will touch on the groundbreaking work that we are introducing in that space, which is absolutely a priority area for this Government.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for securing the debate and for his tireless campaigning. He has held my feet to the fire to get men's health recognised in a way that has not happened before, and pushed the Government to make this a priority area.

We are clear that more needs to be done to improve outcomes across the board for men, particularly in relation to health. That includes men and boys, whose place in society, as we have heard today, is integral to equality for all, because when men thrive, we all thrive. We all have fathers, brothers, friends, husbands, partners and colleagues. When we improve care for women, that impacts society, but that is equally true when we improve care for men. That is why, as part of International Men's Day, we have made some significant announcements, which I will touch on.

My hon. Friend highlighted really well that improving outcomes for men is everybody's business, and I absolutely agree. Whether in relation to economic prosperity for society, delivering education to the next generation, or even politics—or, of course, our own families—it is really important that we support men in every way, and International Men's Day is an opportunity to highlight the issues that they face.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory) spoke about the impact of supporting men, particularly around the loss of a child; my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley gave the example of "Tommy" and talked about how many Tommies there are across the country facing those very issues today; my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller) touched on life expectancy differences for men; and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) touched on the issues facing veterans. Alongside the NHS, we are rolling out Op Courage for veterans, service leavers and reservists across England, and there is different support in different regions, but I will absolutely take up with the veterans Minister what we can do to help support a similar scheme in Northern Ireland.

[*Maria Caulfield*]

The theme of this year's International Men's Day is zero male suicide. The latest data we have from the Office for National Statistics tells us that men account for around three quarters of all deaths by suicide. As many Members have said, that is the biggest cause of premature death in men under 35, but middle-aged men are also a significant risk group, and that is why they are a priority group in our recently published suicide prevention strategy. Over 4,500 men die by suicide in England alone every year. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley noted that is 13 deaths a day.¹ Every suicide is a tragedy, and we know about the ripple effect that it has for family and friends. We have heard from campaigners what a devastating loss it can be.

Achieving zero male suicide is an ambitious target. In our suicide prevention strategy, we have addressed men as a priority group and addressed the many issues that they face, including alcohol addiction, financial pressures and relationship breakdown. Those are all key drivers of male suicide, so we want to tackle them and put better support systems in place.

Male suicide is everyone's business. About two thirds of men who take their own lives are in contact with a frontline service, such as primary care, in the three months leading up to their suicide. That is why every Department—whether it is the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Defence or the Ministry of Justice—has a role to play in our suicide prevention strategy. We are bringing those Departments together to make suicide everyone's business, and we want to see a difference—a reduction—in two and a half years.

I do not have a huge amount of time, because my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley has to respond to the debate, but I want to touch on the announcement we made on International Men's Day of £16 million funding for a new prostate cancer screening trial. On my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke's point about life expectancy, we know that cancer is a significant driver of that. That is why we have rolled out our "man's van" for lung cancer checks, to target men who have previously smoked and perhaps are not as good as they should be in coming forward to get checks done. That is enabling us to detect around 80% of lung cancers at stage 1, rather than at stage 3 and 4 as was the case previously. The prostate research will dramatically change outcomes for men. On the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford, we can look at that on a UK-wide basis, and we will have discussions with the devolved Administrations before that is rolled out in the spring.

We are appointing a men's health ambassador—work will start on that soon—and we are launching a men's health taskforce to join up all the dots. In a similar way to what we have done on the menopause taskforce, my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley, as chair of the APPG, will be invited to that meeting. We will also improve the information on the NHS UK website, to make it easier for men to access help and support. Men often find it difficult to ask for help, but if it is available on the website, they can do that in the privacy of their own home and know that the information is reliable.

We are also now rolling out the HPV vaccine to boys. While we hope that vaccine will help us eradicate cervical cancer, we know that some male cancers—particularly oral cancers—are related to HPV, so rolling out the vaccine to boys will also have an impact on future cancers in men. We also have our major conditions strategy, which will look at things such as heart disease. There is a huge amount of work going on in this space.

I hope that in my whistle-stop tour—

Karl McCartney: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not, because my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley needs time to respond.

I hope that, in showcasing some of the work we are doing, I have demonstrated how seriously we take this issue. Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this space.

10.58 am

Nick Fletcher: I thank everybody who has contributed to this excellent debate, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it to take place, and I thank you, Mr Davies, for all the work you have done on this issue in the past. I thank the Men and Boys Coalition for organising International Men's Day; the Men's Health Forum for the leading work it does; the APPG team, Mark Brooks and Mike Bell; the wonderful charities that are doing great work, such as Andy's Man Club, Men's Sheds, Lads Need Dads, Prostate Cancer UK, and so many more.

Finally, seeing as though the debate was purposefully about suicide, I want to thank all the good men out there. It is sometimes tough being a boy or a man, but when you are feeling low and you think nobody cares, please, please, please reach out. Trust me: people do care. I care, we all in this room care, and most importantly, I know God cares too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Men's Day.

1. [Official Report, 29 November 2023, Vol. 741, c. 8MC.]

Energy Costs and Charges

11 am

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of energy and energy charges.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank the Minister for her courtesy and consideration in our discussion yesterday.

Scots were told in 2014 that the benefit of being in the UK was the pooling and sharing that it afforded: assets and resources were pooled and then shared out across the nations, with the broad shoulders of the Union supposedly providing fairly for all. But how is that working out?

The King's Speech had at its heart Scottish oil and gas, the extent of which was hidden from the Scottish people when it was discovered, as the McCrone report detailed. Ever since then its demise has been predicted and foretold. By 2014, it was apparently all gone, and Scotland left with only a burden. Now, Scottish oil is to save the UK economy. Scots can only look with envy at Norway, with its society and economy transformed by a resource the benefit of which has been denied us. Some nations discovered oil and saw the desert bloom; Scotland discovered oil and saw huge parts of her land turned into an industrial desert. Pooling and sharing? I don't think so.

Now another natural bounty has blessed our land. Renewable energy is clean, infinite and what our world, not just our land, needs as part of a just transition from fossil fuels. Let us consider the scale of the bounty. Scotland produces one quarter of the UK's renewable energy and has the potential to produce much, much more—offshore wind, as well as other forms of energy, including tidal, wave and onshore wind, ensures that. Scotland's share of Europe's offshore wind capacity has reduced because of improved technologies and opportunities in other countries, but Scotland is still the envy of other nations.

Naysayers who talk that bounty down are the same ones who predicted the demise of our oil. In 2009, only 27% of Scotland's electricity came from renewables; by 2020, the equivalent of 97.4% of Scotland's gross electricity consumption came from them. Three years on, the figure will be even greater, and that is before offshore wind, which is still minimal, comes on stream at scale.

The scale of what is coming from offshore wind is massive. That was confirmed by the then Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which estimated that in 2021 Scotland exported south 35 TWh hours of electricity. That is to increase to 124 TWh by 2030. I struggled to understand what a terawatt was. For those similarly afflicted, let me clarify that 1 TW is 1 billion kW. Let us put that in context: the average Scottish household uses just over 3,200 kWh per annum. And let us remind ourselves that it is anticipated that by 2030 Scotland will be sending south 124 TWh, or 124 billion kWh. That is enough to power 37.6 million homes—the equivalent of powering Scotland's 2.5 million homes almost 15 times over. That is year on year, and the figure is growing. That is the scale of Scotland's resource.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. He is making a compelling case for Scotland. May I suggest to the Minister that there is also a compelling case for Northern Ireland? We have not had the opportunity to advance to the same level as Scotland, but we wish to do so. Does the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) agree that if we are to move forward, there has to be a joint strategy for all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, because we can and must all play our part? I envy what Scotland has done. We in Northern Ireland want to do the same.

Kenny MacAskill: Well, I prefer an independent strategy, similar to what Norway and Denmark are doing, but I concede that Northern Ireland is frequently ignored because so much of the gas grid is pan-Great Britain, rather than across the Irish sea.

Let us look at how Scotland's resource is pooled and shared. I have detailed the 35 TWh rising to 124 TWh, but I have not explained that no payment is received for that resource. The energy is sent south, but there is no financial return to Scotland. Besides nothing being paid for it, there are now efforts to take it directly south with neither a bawbee nor a pretty please being given for it. Off south it is to go, and for no payment.

The Eastern HVDC—high voltage direct current sub-sea—transmission cables, also referred to as the Eastern Green Link projects, are the longest HVDC cables to be laid in the UK and will run from Peterhead to Redcar and from Torness to Drax. It is estimated that those links will take 5 TWh, or 5 billion kWh, of Scotland's renewable energy source south, again with no payment. Additionally, the proposed Berwick Bank offshore wind farm in the firth of Forth will alone produce sufficient energy to supply more households than Scotland possesses, but a cable is proposed to be laid to take 40% of its energy directly south, again with no payment.

What about the sharing? Where is the benefit from the supposed broad shoulders of the Union? Where is the return for what we contribute? A recent question to the now Department for Energy Security and Net Zero asked whether consideration would be given to crediting domestic energy users in the localities where energy is produced and landed. After all, it is being produced onshore or offshore in Scotland, so we might have thought that some credit or benefit would accrue to Scotland, and it might even be cheaper there. But no—the answer was simply that it is a matter for Ofgem, which we know is a creature of statute and can act only within its set powers or as directed by Ministers. No such rules exist and no direction has been given. The energy is not only to go south for no payment, but no benefit is to accrue to Scotland from it.

There is talk of payments to those facing having pylons placed near them, but what about those who live in the land where the energy is being produced? Winter will soon be upon us. The weather is changing and the temperature is falling. The cold is being felt and the need to heat homes is increasing, but it is not simply heat but power that is required. Energy, and especially electricity, is needed not just to keep the cold at bay. It is required by the mother to wash her children's clothes, keep them clean and uphold the standards she seeks to maintain. It is required by the parent seeking to power up an iPad or laptop to help their child's education and

[Kenny MacAskill]

advance their life chances. It is required by the worker charging their phone to allow them to find employment or do the additional hours that the Government want, or simply to keep body and soul together. More shamefully, it is also required by the sick, including those on dialysis and those recovering from cancer, whose immune systems are weakened and for whom warmth and power are a necessity for life, not a luxury for living.

Despite the fact that Scotland is energy rich, our people are fuel poor. Already more than a third of Scots have been assessed as being in fuel poverty. Even more shamefully, almost a quarter are in extreme fuel poverty.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for securing the debate. Households in rural areas have the highest fuel poverty rate—15.9% in 2022—and I am concerned that that will continue into 2024 if the Government do not act. Somerton and Frome has an estimated 13,060 homes off the gas grid that rely on alternative sources of fuel. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should accelerate the deployment of renewable power, provide more funding and remove the Government restrictions on solar and wind?

Kenny MacAskill: I certainly agree that there is a prejudice against those off the gas grid. It is not simply about those in rural areas, whether that means the hon. Lady's constituents or my own in the lee of the Lammermuirs, but about those in urban areas—often urban deprived areas, in multi-storey flats, where gas is not available and the heating system is expensive.

The numbers I was given are historical, and they will only rise—if they have not already risen. After all, the statistics from the Scottish Ambulance Service for last winter's hypothermic call-outs were shameful, but that is likely to be the baseline, and worse could follow. Energy prices may have fallen along with the energy price cap, but according to National Energy Action the average household is still paying £800 more for heat and power than before the energy crisis started, at a time when the cost of living crisis has subsumed the energy price crisis. Costs will be higher this year than last, when support was given to reduce bills. It is not just the big energy companies making money out of others' misery; the Treasury made money through VAT on increased bills, which amounted to £1.1 billion in the UK and £96 million in Scotland. The cash is there. It is who has got it, or not got it, that is the issue.

Scotland is geographically further north and our climate is colder and damper than that in other parts of the UK, which makes access to heat and power even more essential. Winters can be cruel and the hardship in northern parts extreme. Let us examine the sharing—after all, we are told pooling and sharing is a benefit of the Union. When there is so much renewable energy being produced in Scotland, why are costs so high? Where is the social tariff alluded to by Government that even many suppliers support? It could be paid for out of general taxation—shared, that is. But no, the vulnerable are again left to struggle this winter.

Where is the credit, or reduced costs more generally, as I have mentioned? In my constituency, people can see the turbines turning or the towers rising from their

doors, but they are unable to heat their homes. Moreover, why are costs greater in Scotland, the nation providing more energy than it has households? I wrote to Ofgem, asking them to detail the standing charges for electricity imposed on consumers in Scotland and in England. They have provided the answer for the costs imposed up until this December, but there is no sign of any variation coming. This will run and run, and so will the injustice—with the consultation not closing until January when winter has passed.

Scotland is divided into two zones: northern and southern, SSE and ScottishPower Energy Networks—that is, roughly the highlands and the lowlands. England is divided into north-west, southern and London. Ofgem's answer disclosed that both Scottish zones were charged more, and often substantially more, than regions south of the border. That differential runs across all forms of charging, whether that is whether standard credit, direct debit or prepayment meter.

Let me detail the situation for those on prepayment meters. After all, they should be benefiting most from Scotland's energy, which is being pooled. Their needs are invariably greatest and this bounty should be prioritised towards them, although similar benefits should apply equally across Scotland irrespective of payment method and could also be applied across the UK. Many are now counting their ability to access heat and power in pence, if not pence. It is not 50p or £1 for the meter, but what they calculate that they can afford to use. It is why we have the weasel phrase of "self-disconnection". That is not personal choice but imposed cruelty.

Let us look at standing charges for electricity. Including VAT, it is 69p a day in southern Scotland and 66p in northern Scotland, yet it is lower in England and only 46p in London. Per annum, it means that the standing charges for those on prepayment meters are, on average, £251.75 in southern Scotland, £241.92 in northern Scotland, yet only £166.10 in London. Those are not my figures—they are Ofgem's.

We have seen the pooling and now we are seeing the sharing. We are giving, but not receiving. We produce the energy and our people, especially the poorest Scots, are charged more for it. The broad shoulders of the Union is the claim, but sleight of hand is the reality—as the bounty is taken, yet higher costs are imposed. As I begin to conclude on the costs of energy and energy charges—with the perversity of energy-rich Scotland and fuel-poor Scots—I make my first remarks to the Scottish Government. They have sold off ScotWind cheap and failed to stand up for Scotland. I am reminded of the words from the Proclaimers song "Cap in Hand",

"We fight, when they ask us

We boast, then we cower

We beg

For a piece of

What's already ours".

As the song says,

"I can't understand why we let someone else rule our land, Cap in Hand".

It is time they stood up for our land on energy and electricity prices.

Meanwhile, I ask the Minister: if energy policy is reserved to the UK, where is the pooling and sharing? There is talk of payments to those having pylons nearby,

but what about those where the energy is produced? Will there be a social tariff for the vulnerable this year? Ofgem is appointed by this Government and accountable to them. It is carrying out a welcome, if long overdue, review on standing charges. As I said, submissions do not close until late January—too late for this winter. Will the Minister direct Ofgem that standing charges should be abolished, as many suppliers argue? As National Energy Action states:

“How can it be right that someone who can’t afford any energy pays”

the same as

“someone in a mansion?”

It is an energy poll tax and equally unjust. Failing that, will the Minister ensure that standing charges are at least equalised across the UK, rather than seeing Scotland pool its energy, yet share higher charges? In summary, will she end the perversity of the land that produces the energy seeing its people and its poorest paying the most for that energy?

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) for his passionate and informative speech. I will say at the start that renewable energy clearly does not fit into my portfolio, but if I cannot answer on any points I will try to find the answers and follow up subsequently in writing.

First, the Government have been clear on the importance of protecting energy consumers, and I take my role as Minister for Energy Consumers and Affordability incredibly seriously. That is why I frequently meet energy suppliers and the regulator to remind them of their obligations and my expectations that they will do all they can to support customers, especially the most vulnerable, this winter and beyond. In response to the wholesale energy price challenge caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last year, the Government acted swiftly to provide support to UK households and businesses, delivering almost £40 billion of energy bills support through different schemes from October 2022. The Government also continue to stand firmly behind energy consumers.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Although I think our constituents are very grateful for the £40 billion of subsidy that was given across the cold winter last year, does the Minister agree that it would not have been necessary to spend that £40 billion of taxpayers’ money if we had carried on insulating homes at the rate that we had been up until the Liberal Democrats left government in 2015?

Amanda Solloway: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course, the fact is that we had a cost of living crisis mainly, as I have pointed out, because of Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine. That was the situation we found ourselves in.

For households in fuel poverty, we have targeted support such as £150 directly off energy bills through the warm home discount, which last year we increased in value and extended to around 3 million households. We are also tackling the root problem through our energy efficiency schemes. We are looking at ways to make the warm home discount more flexible, and also

to help respond to future increased pressures on consumers’ bills, and we continue to monitor energy bills and keep options under review.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Figures released by the utility regulator in Northern Ireland show that small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland are paying almost 10p per kW more than a typical EU price or that in the rest of the UK. Does the Minister agree that this places Northern Ireland businesses at a competitive disadvantage, particularly given the land border with the Republic of Ireland? Does she agree that further support measures need to be put in place, particularly for small to medium-sized businesses?

Amanda Solloway: I point out to the hon. Lady that I had a meeting yesterday with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and we were discussing these very particular issues. She has my assurance that those discussions are always mindful and at the top of my thoughts.

I also encourage hon. Members to make their constituents aware of the Government’s “It All Adds Up” campaign, which shows simple measures to save people money on their energy bills this winter. I know that the hon. Member for East Lothian has a particular interest in standing charges, as he discussed them with me yesterday. Standing charges are a matter for Ofgem.

I am pleased to share that last week Ofgem published a call for input on standing charges to look at how they are applied to energy bills and what alternatives could be considered. The standing charge is used to recover the costs required to provide vital energy company services, including providing and maintaining the wires, pipes and cables that deliver power to a customer’s door. If the standing charge were scrapped, as the hon. Member for East Lothian suggests, suppliers would still have to recover reasonable costs in other ways, which would mean charging a higher price for every unit of power used. That could have significant consequences for some categories of vulnerable customers: for example, those with high energy use due to medical equipment. That is one of the reasons we are working through the matter very carefully.

The standing charge can also vary from region to region, as has been pointed out, because of the differing costs associated with the transmission and distribution of supplying energy to a particular area. Geographical factors mean it costs more to run the local electricity distribution network in the north of Scotland than elsewhere. To help protect consumers in the north of Scotland from those costs, a Government cross-subsidy scheme provides an annual cross-subsidy of some £112 million to that area. The scheme is funded by electricity suppliers from across Great Britain and reduces the electricity distribution charge for a typical household in the north of Scotland by more than £60 a year. The cost-reflective approach means that Scottish consumers actually pay lower charges for the high-voltage transmission network than most consumers in England and Wales.

I am also aware that the hon. Member for East Lothian is interested in the benefits available for communities located near transmission network infrastructure, especially those in Scotland near offshore wind facilities. Offshore wind farm developers already provide a range of community benefit packages developed in consultation with local

[Amanda Solloway]

communities. For projects based in Scotland, developers follow the Scottish Government's offshore energy good practice principles when creating a community benefit package. However, we want to ensure communities hosting transmission network infrastructure can benefit from supporting the delivery of cheaper, secure and low carbon energy for all of Great Britain. We have therefore consulted on proposals for community benefits. The consultation proposed to introduce voluntary guidance on the appropriate levels and forms of benefits to give communities the knowledge, power and flexibility to decide what benefits they want in consultation with the project developer. The consultation has now closed and we intend to publish a response as soon as we can.

I now want to come on to prepayment meters. Historically, customers on prepayment meters have paid higher standing charges than direct debit customers, reflecting the higher cost of serving those customers. The Government subsidises prepayment meter customers through the energy price guarantee to ensure they pay no more for their energy than direct debit customers. That seems to be the fair thing to do. The support is due to end at the end of March 2024 when the energy price guarantee ends, but Ofgem is due to announce shortly how it will create an enduring replacement for that scheme so that prepayment meter customers will have that unfair premium they were paying removed from their bills once and for all. Furthermore, the Government have worked with Ofgem and the industry to see that the rules extending protections with regard to prepayment meter installations for the most vulnerable consumers have come into effect.

I wish to close by reminding all hon. Members that they should encourage their constituents to contact their energy suppliers if they are concerned about their energy bills or their ability to pay. Energy suppliers have an obligation to their customers and Ofgem has also introduced further rules on customer services for this winter. Once again, I sincerely thank the hon. Member for East Lothian for securing this incredibly important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Debt in Africa

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of debt in Africa.

I am extremely grateful to the House authorities for allowing me to secure this crucial debate on debt in Africa. I intend to cover the essential points that demand our urgent action. Today, I stand before this Chamber to confront a crisis of global magnitude—the escalating debt crisis in African countries. This is not merely an economic issue; it is a humanitarian challenge that demands our immediate and decisive response. The way in which we address this crisis does not just reflect on our policies but on the core values of Great Britain on the world stage. This moment is more than a test of financial acumen. It is a testament to our commitment to human dignity and global justice.

The decisions that we make in Parliament have far-reaching implications, shaping the futures of millions. In our interconnected world, the fortunes of African nations are intrinsically linked to our own. The Labour party has a proud history of leading international efforts on debt cancellation and relief for the world's poorest. We remain committed to international development. I feel our response to this crisis will define our legacy in international solidarity and moral leadership.

The situation in Africa is increasingly alarming. Currently, more than half of the continent's low-income developing countries are either in debt distress or on the brink of it. Debt distress refers to a situation in which a country is struggling to meet its debt obligations. That figure has worryingly doubled since 2015, and looking ahead to 2024 and 2025, those countries will face debt repayments six times higher than their total debt servicing in 2021. This drastic increase is a result of several factors, including the covid-19 pandemic and global tensions—such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Having liaised with the shadow Foreign Office Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown)—I am cognisant of the fact that the Labour party has long advocated for debt relief as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. It steadfastly believes that the resources of low-income nations must be directed towards enhancing the lives of their citizens rather than being drained by unsustainable debt repayments. Our perspective must be rooted in the principle that investment in infrastructure and public services is crucial—not just for Britain's societal stability, but equally for countries across Africa.

We need to see a model where an increase in GDP in those nations translates into significant investment in their own societies and infrastructure. That approach counters a current trend where a substantial portion of their national income is funnelled into servicing external debts, often with stringent conditions attached. We should envisage a world where economic growth in African countries is harnessed for their own development, fostering stronger, more resilient economies and societies. It is a vision where international co-operation and fair debt practices replace the cycle of debt and dependency, allowing those countries to realise their full potential on the global stage.

If I now come on to the middle east and north Africa region, the contrast between the accumulating wealth of the few and the deepening debt of the many is stark. The richest 0.05% in the region, with wealth above \$5 million, saw their wealth surge by 75% from \$1.6 trillion in 2019 to \$3 trillion by the end of 2022. That boom in ultra wealth comes on the back of every country in the middle east and north Africa region sinking deeper into debt. For instance, in Tunisia, public debt increased from 43% of GDP in 2010 to 80% in 2021. In Egypt, it increased from 70% to 90%.

In the light of the escalating crisis, I ask the Minister: what steps are the Government taking to work with international partners to address the debt crisis that some African countries are facing, including debt held bilaterally, multilaterally and by private creditors? A World Bank report has highlighted a 35% increase in debt interest bills for the world's poorest countries, further strained by the pandemic and increased food import prices. I ask the Minister to elucidate the UK Government's response to that alarming development.

The G20 common framework for debt treatments was designed to deliver a sustainable solution to lower-income countries' debt vulnerabilities, but it has failed. Only four countries have so far applied for debt treatment. Of those, only Chad has reached an agreement with both its private and bilateral creditors. That agreement appears inadequate, and has been criticised for its failure to reduce Chad's debt burden and make it sustainable. Another example is Zambia. It defaulted in 2020, but has not yet reached a comprehensive restructuring agreement. The failure of the framework to deliver necessary relief is largely due to private creditors' reluctance to participate in debt restructuring.

As a significant funder of debt relief initiatives and a supporter of international financial institutions, the UK has a role in ensuring that private creditors participate in restructurings. Some organisations, such as Debt Justice, argue that without firm action, English courts may end up enforcing repayment on behalf of private creditors who are exploiting official debt relief initiatives. Those organisations argue that the reluctance of private creditors to agree to restructuring creates a domino effect where other large creditors also refuse to accept a loss. It leads to a slow, uncertain process that consistently fails to deliver effective debt relief.

Given those challenges, I ask the Minister: what proactive steps are the UK Government taking to engage with, and ensure the participation of, private creditors in the debt relief process? How are the Government planning to address the issues raised by organisations such as Debt Justice to prevent debt relief initiatives from being used to pay off other debts rather than investing in the country? The United Kingdom, as a key player in global finance, has a crucial role in shaping frameworks that govern sovereign debt contracts. My challenge to the Government is: what initiatives are being pursued to reform the frameworks and facilitate effective debt restructuring?

I will turn to the impact on women and girls, who are being disproportionately affected by the debt crisis in Africa. I am aware that many hon. Members will elaborate further on this topic. The crisis leads to a reduced governmental investment in vital public services such as healthcare, education and social services. It also has an impact on supply-side factors, affecting those who work

in health and social care. Globally, women account for 67% of the health and social care workforce. As we strive for a society where women are empowered globally, it is important that we look at the consequences of the debt crisis and its impact on egalitarianism and progressive values. Clearly, if Governments do not have the funds to support the basic needs of their populations, women and girls in particular will suffer. I call on our Government to outline how our international aid policies are addressing the unique impact of this crisis on women and girls in Africa.

Beyond that, there would be no good or relevant debate without mention of our effort to combat climate change. The debt burden significantly impedes African countries' abilities to adapt to a changing climate and mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis. As we know, reaching net zero is of critical importance for us all, here and around the world, and I know that the Labour party is doing all it can to acknowledge the impact that the climate crisis is having on African nations.

Sustainable development and climate resilience are urgent needs, yet the debt crisis presents a formidable barrier. I implore the Government to detail collaborative efforts, aligning debt relief with climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies in the countries that I am discussing.

I will now address the long-term consequences of the African debt crisis and the serious threat that they pose to development, poverty alleviation and progress towards achieving the sustainable development goals. The SDGs are fundamental pillars of the international organisations that the UK works so diligently to support.

Low-income countries trapped in a debt doom loop cannot access the transformational finance that would allow them to escape from extreme poverty, fight climate change and meet their global goals. So, I urge the Government to share comprehensive strategies for confronting those profound challenges.

This critical moment demands international solidarity and decisive action. The UK, along with other leading economies, must spearhead the search for fair and sustainable solutions. Therefore, I ask the Minister the question: how are the Government working with international partners to develop strategies for long-term economic stability and social wellbeing in African countries?

I understand from my hon. Friend the shadow Minister that a Labour Government will restore Britain as a trusted and long-term partner to tackle the great challenges of our time, to promote the rules-based order and to deliver transformational change with communities around the globe. In seeking to address the challenge of debt burdens and to foster sustainable and resilient economies in Africa, I say to hon. Members here in Westminster Hall and indeed the whole House that now is the time not to cling to existing strategies but to leave no stone unturned.

In conclusion, the gravity of the African debt crisis necessitates collective action. We must look beyond temporary fixes and address the systemic issues that are at play. I am sure that a future Labour Government will embrace a new approach towards development that is based on respect and a genuine partnership with the global south, which involves supporting its plans to eliminate poverty, tackle climate change and reach the global goals. However, we cannot wait for that future

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

Labour Government; we must act now. So, I implore the current UK Government to act now to address the debt crisis facing African nations.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front-Bench spokesmen from 3.25 pm onwards. I have four other Members indicating that they wish to speak, so I would be grateful if they could bear that instruction in mind.

2.43 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this very important debate and on such a well-informed and impassioned speech, which outlined the absolute reason for urgent action on debt cancellation.

I start my contribution by declaring an interest. Before being elected to this place, I was a Jubilee 2000 campaigner back in the 1990s, along with others, and I was then a trustee for the Jubilee Debt Campaign, which is now Debt Justice. As a campaigner for Christian Aid, then for Methodist aid and then for the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development or CAFOD, I led ordinary people in protests up and down the country. Those people all absolutely understood the stranglehold that debt repayments have over so many Governments that would otherwise use that money to educate girls, invest in clean water and sanitation, tackle climate change, and invest in infrastructure such as roads to increase trade and boost the economy.

Together, across the country, we wrote to MPs. Yes, I used to be one of those people who wrote to MPs, sending in postcards. We held protests in our towns and villages, and made endless amounts of red chains to symbolise the need to be free of unjust chains of debt. In 1998, 100,000 people circled Birmingham to make a human red chain to influence the G8 that was meeting there. In 2001, we went to Genoa. I remember coachload after coachload of all ages, sometimes very elderly. There were parishioners, people from faith groups across the country, going to Genoa for the G8, because they were so determined to make the change. In 2005, we marched through Edinburgh, and celebrated when the previous Labour Government made huge inroads, taking the lead in brokering a deal that cancelled £4 billion of debt of the world's poorest countries.

Jubilee 2000 was a huge joint global campaign that led ultimately to the cancellation of more than £100 billion of debt owed by 35 of the world's poorest countries. I saw the difference it made on the ground. Having campaigned for the reduction under the IMF's heavily indebted poor countries initiative, I was delighted to see a teachers' house in a village in Zambia bearing the huge letters HIPC. Enabled by debt-reduction payments, that house provided teachers for a whole generation, boosting opportunities and the economy, all from debt reduction.

But where are we now? There simply has not been the same UK leadership on this since 2010. That has been a glaring missed opportunity, which undermines any warm words the Minister might be about to say on leading on sustainable development goals. I welcome the Select

Committee on International Development report on debt relief in low-income countries, published in March this year, but I do not welcome as much the lukewarm response from the Government.

I also welcome the inclusion of debt in many places in the international White Paper, published yesterday, and agree with its assessment that high and rising debt vulnerability poses a significant development challenge. There needs to be more focus on debt reduction for the world's most fragile and conflict-risk states. That is vitally linked to climate finance but, again, will there really be the significant action we need to see following that White Paper?

Lower-income countries have been facing increasingly high debt over recent years, with external debt payments increasing by 150% between 2011 and 2023. They have now reached their highest levels in 25 years. There are currently 54 countries in debt crisis, including many in Africa, such as Zambia, Ghana, Mozambique and Kenya. As the thousands of people from across the country who took action in the Jubilee 2000 campaign on debt know, those current unsustainable debt levels have a serious impact on the lives of millions of people across the continent, and on any chance of achieving the sustainable development goals.

A reported 72% of the sustainable development goals to achieve poverty eradication are off track. According to the UN, they are "woefully off track", dangerously so. The increasing amount of unsustainable debt is one of the major reasons for that. Many countries were forced to reduce public spending during the pandemic, to keep up with debt payments. That is spending on education, health, water and sanitation. Lower-income countries spend five times more on debt repayment than on addressing the climate crisis.

Countries have had no choice but to turn to fossil fuels to generate the funds needed to meet their colossal debt repayments. I will be at COP28 in a few weeks' time with a delegation of MPs, and I will make this case to those attending from across the globe. I look to the Government to make the same case and the links. I hope the Minister will say something about the link between debt cancellation and climate finance, which is essential.

The Government could show global leadership and rectify flaws, especially in the common framework agreed by the G20. Four countries have now applied to the common framework, but none has received any debt cancellation so far. Zambia applied in February, but there is a gap of a mechanism to induce private creditors to accept the same terms as other creditors, which leads to disastrous impasses; it is a frozen system. Zambia has £6.3 billion of debt and, in the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough, is in that debt doom loop. Yet the UK is in a unique position to strengthen the legal framework to ensure the participation of private creditors, as 90% of the bonds issued by countries eligible for the common framework are governed by English law. The UK could pass legislation to incentivise private creditors to take part in debt relief. Two possible legislative options are to replicate the Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Act 2010 and to extend UK corporate law on debt restructuring so Governments can restructure their debts in a similar way to companies. There are ways to fix the issue, but as it is currently set up, it just will not be the answer to debt cancellation that it should be.

I end by asking the Government and the Minister to take the action needed to end the debt crisis. Specifically, will the Minister commit to consulting on new legislation to compel private creditors to participate in debt relief to tackle the debt crisis in lower-income countries?

2.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and to speak in today's debate. I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for leading the debate. We are all here because we have a passion for foreign affairs, and it is great to support him today and I congratulate him on how he has set the scene. It is also a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) for the second time in recent days, as she spoke before me in the COP28 debate last Thursday. I recognise that she has a deep interest and passion, shown through her work with Christian Aid, CAFOD and WaterAid and some of her other projects. I am pleased to follow her in particular because with all that depth of knowledge comes a contribution that makes the debate even more salient and interesting for us. I thank her for that as well.

There is no doubt that the covid pandemic had a profoundly negative impact on Africa's sovereign debt situation. It has been stated that some 22 countries are either in debt distress or at high risk. That has meant that African Governments are struggling more to pay the debt incurred. Countries such as Mozambique and Zimbabwe were already in debt—and indeed, Malawi. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who will shortly speak for the SNP, has over the years that I have known him always spoken about Malawi and the strong relationships that he and his constituency have with that country. Those things are important when we discuss the matters under consideration today.

Research has shown that as of August 2022, countries in Africa owed the UK a total of £2,758 million, which accounts for 56% of all debts owed to the UK, with Sudan's the highest. It is important to note that debt is not necessarily a bad thing in itself and can help with economic development. I say that because the increase in debt in the early 2000s was accompanied by a higher level of economic development in Africa. There is a history and I say that because I want to have it on record that it is not all doom and gloom. If we look back through history, we will see that countries were able to address the debt issue and grow accordingly. Sometimes, we have a duty to try and encourage those countries and work with them to get them out of a bad patch.

I was talking to the hon. Member for Glasgow North, and as I sat listening to the hon. Member for Slough's contribution, I was reminded of the story in Matthew 25 where the master travels into a far-off country. Mr Vickers, you will know the story and probably everybody in the Chamber will know it. The master gives his three servants five talents, two talents and one talent. He comes back and the guy who had the five talents has made them into 10, the guy who had two has made them into four and we know the story of the one who did not invest his money and work hard.

The reason why I tell the story is because that is the Africa of the 2000s. Today, I believe that we in the western world have a duty to try to get them out of these bad times, to give them the advice and assistance

they need, and to give them experience. We cannot just—I say this genuinely—pursue somebody and say, “We must get your debt” because that will lead to more debt for them and even higher levels of poverty, so I use the biblical story of Matthew 25 to illustrate in a small way, and hopefully in a strong way, what it means to help others.

According to the World Bank's debt sustainability analysis, nine African countries were in debt distress and unable to fulfil their repayment requirements as of the end of September 2023. A further 15 African countries were at high risk of debt distress, with another 14 at moderate risk. If it were up to me—I am not the person to do it, so I look to the Minister and the Government to take on this task—I would speak to each of those countries individually. There has to be a two-way dialogue, whereby we can discuss how we manage debt repayments and help countries to grow at the same time.

None of us is a stranger to the impact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had on our ability to afford things and get our debt under control. I have constituents—indeed, I expect all Members do—who are still coping with the effects and struggling to regain control of their finances, especially when it comes to paying for gas, oil and electricity. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is causing a rise in the price of commodities, particularly food and gas, and the war is also disrupting food supply chains, which especially affects people in Africa.

Between 2010 and 2021, external debt servicing payments in Africa more than quadrupled, growing at over 60 times the pace of average fiscal revenues. In discussing how much debt, and by what rate, it should be paid back, we must show compassion for a country's social and financial situation. There has to be realism about how much money can be paid back and the rate of repayment. Regardless of whether that means restructuring loans or helping them to balance or grow their economy, we should be trying to do it. For example, there must be repayment options for countries with negative human rights and social considerations.

Strengthening debt management policies to deal with repayment issues through Governments is one of the best ways to enable the stable payback of debts. If paying back will ultimately plunge a state into further demise and poverty, I do not believe that is the right way to do it. We have to find a better solution. I am not just saying that for the sake of it; if we want to recoup debts, we have to work with countries to make that happen.

The economic consequences of the covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have undermined the ability of many African nations to service their sovereign debt. Consideration must be given to that, to human rights abuses and to a nation's ability to pay back its debt. I look forward to the Minister's comments, and we as a nation should continue to be supportive to all those struggling, especially through aid. I know the Minister is compassionate and understands what we are asking for, but when it comes to dealing with the debt of African nations and others, there has to be a sense of realism and real compassion in order to try to get them out the other side. By doing so, we will help them contribute to their future. At the end of the day, it is surely about their future. Let us get it right.

Tony Lloyd *rose*—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Sorry, I call Claudia Webbe.

2.59 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this important debate. It could not have come at a more timely moment.

The debt that Africa owes is equivalent to something like 24% of its gross domestic product. As of 2022, Africa's debt burden was around \$1.8 trillion. As an absolute number, that does not appear as high as some—Germany's debt is larger—but compared with the living standards and available wealth of the people and their Governments, it is crippling. That debt has been placed on the backs of African nations as a legacy of centuries of colonialism and exploitation—exploitation that continues today, as western corporations make billions every year from the natural resources of the continent, particularly in the form of mineral extraction.

To demonstrate the extent to which western mineral exploitation damages Africa, out of all African nations, only Botswana's Government retain ownership and control of their own country's considerable mineral wealth. As a result, it has by far the lowest national debt as a percentage of its gross domestic product—barely a quarter of neighbouring South Africa's, and even its closest rivals have double its debt. Botswana has stated that its aim in retaining control of its mineral resources is to maximise the economic benefit for its people—and it works.

For centuries, Africa was pillaged of its wealth: timber, oil, diamonds, and, above all, its people. Western nations grew rich on the backs of the slaves that they took and the exploitation of those who remained in Africa, and then from their colonisation of those same nations. Rich countries and their corporations continue to steal by deceit, by intimidation, and by fomenting unrest and division, particularly to obtain the rare earth minerals that drive our technological society and bloat the bank accounts of the companies that make and use that technology.

Africa is not poor; the west has stolen its wealth and is still doing so today. Aid and loans to Africa, along with personal remittances from Africans working abroad, are worth far less than what is taken out of Africa. That difference is at least \$40 billion annually, making aid and loans little more than camouflage for neo-colonial exploitation. That piles debt on to the people of Africa, which drains away their ability to build themselves better economies and a better standard of living. And, as usual, the money going out of Africa is going into corporate profits, while the cost of loans and aid is borne by taxpayers.

The reparations that the UK and other nations owe to the people of Africa—and the other countries exploited for so long—is a huge debt, both moral and financial. Cancelling Africa's debt would be one small step towards repaying what was stolen and making restitutions for centuries of damage done. Yet Governments will not acknowledge the debt that they owe to Africa, let alone put measures in place to do something about it or to claw back some of the obscene corporate and personal fortunes dug out of Africa and its people. It is high time that that situation changed.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I call Sir Tony Lloyd.

3.4 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Vickers. I was so excited at the prospect of speaking in front of you that—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): We were excited to listen to you, Tony.

Tony Lloyd: Thank you. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on introducing this debate. It is timely. I think we all know that the crisis in Africa is real. We—as a world, not simply as a country—need now to address that. I would like to start quite a long time ago, rather like my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson). When we look back over the history of the debate around indebtedness—to “break the chains” and all those phrases that used to trip off our tongues about the need for change—I believed that the world would be very different.

I want to relate something from around 30 years ago. I went to the funeral of a very young child in Mozambique. The baby died because the mother simply could not feed that baby. It was shocking at the time to see a baby denied the nutrition that I would expect for my own grandchildren, for my constituents and for our world. At the time, I would have said, “It will change.” I would have said that we would move down the path of debt relief. Had we had this debate 30 years ago—we probably did have it—we would have been told, “Don't worry: with a combination of looking carefully and kindly at debt management, at the transmission of technical aid and assistance and at the growth of trade, the world will be very different.”

Well, the world is very different: it is worse for those in Africa. In practical terms, the little baby from all those years back, whom I talked about, is now replicated by many others. Debt is an enslavement of the generation to come, and that is, of itself, something that we ought to rail against. How can a child be born into the enslavement that debt causes? My hon Friends have given different accounts of debt, and we can probably argue about the figures. The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) used a particular figure, but the figure I have about the GDP-to-debt ratio is that debt will now be something of the order of 60% of GDP across sub-Saharan Africa. Whether that is exactly right or wrong absolutely does not matter. It matters in general terms—we can talk trillions or billions of dollars or pounds—but debt impinges on the quality, the reality and the possibility of life of millions of people across the African continent. It is at the human level that debt matters.

If we look at the battle against poverty, the battle against poor health, the battle for education, the battle to create the health services and the battle around climate change, we are losing those battles. We are losing them in this generation—at the moment—and we have to change. We have to change in a particular way, because, at some point, we have to make our minds up and say whether we are prepared to create a very different relationship: the indebted no longer as clients of those who hold the debt but, instead, as partners. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough made some very profound points about this.

If we are not a partner to African nations and the people of Africa, we lose battles such as climate change, which is our common battle together. It would be remarkable for Africans to know that we are losing it

together, because they make so little contribution to the problems that we have all caused around climate change. African nations as a whole are insignificant at the moment, although an Africa of the future, if not helped through transition to those climate change-consistent policies, will potentially be a major producer of greenhouse gases. We should therefore be partners, but if we are going to be partners, we have to be meaningful about what debt really means.

Those who were in the Chamber earlier heard the international development Minister, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) make a very good series of statements on the White Paper. I welcome that White Paper, but there is a challenge that the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) has to take back to the Prime Minister and others. It is not enough to print the words in the White Paper; we need the political will to translate that into national action in the UK and international action. On national action in the UK, when I looked into our history of debt relief, the only figures I could come up with showed that the UK's spending on debt over the last 10 years or so has been £44 million. That is absolutely insignificant against the scale of the problem. We have to do more by way of debt forgiveness, but not simply on our own. We have to be a part of that global coalition that challenges debt and looks at debt restructuring in a real and rational way.

We have to look, for example, at Zambia and the number of people who have evidenced the situation there. Zambia could not come to an agreement, partly because it was the private debtholders who caused the crisis there. Zambia then offered to pay them some 73 cents on the dollar, compared with 55 cents on the dollar for intergovernmental loans. That was a massively bigger rate of return for the private investors, even though they charged massively higher interest rates on their debt. Bear in the mind that the reason for charging higher interest rates is relevant to risk. They put the risk premium in, but having put the risk premium in, they then wanted to be paid a superabundant return on their investment. The reason that failed is that it was inconsistent with the G20 common framework, which said that there had to be a rough equivalence between Government and private debtholders. That is right; there should be that kind of equivalence. We have to be in this together.

A challenge for the Minister is this: are this Government prepared? As a lot of that debt is operated through UK law, it is in our capacity to ensure that that debt, which is factored through the City of London and so on, is managed in a way that says to private debtholders that they have to pay their fair share of debt forgiveness and debt relief, if we are genuinely going to restructure on these issues.

We can make a change. I may not have been able to give hope to the mother of the child I talked about before, as I do not think I would have been so bold as even to say to her that something could be better at that stage of her life. Perhaps I would have said to other people that the world can change, and it can change for the better. Let us ensure that we can do it in this generation. Let us ensure that now is the time.

This has to be a political priority, and I believe my party will take this on board. I hope that in a year's time or thereabouts we will be sat around having this

debate again, and we will be sat on different sides of this little horseshoe. It will be about political will. As I have said to the Minister, the challenge is whether the political will is there from the Prime Minister. Is there the political will to say that the decision to cut the development assistance in the way this nation did took us in the wrong direction? Is the political will there to raise those very powerful points, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East did, about the history of post-colonial Africa?

Even now, we subsidise, for example, Rwanda and Uganda in terms of their education and health service. That is the right thing to do. In turn, however, the armies of those two countries have been part of the exploitation of the mineral wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which of course is then shipped over to the west, where it is paid not at a value-added rate, but at the market rate. Who controls the market? It is not the producers of those rare earth minerals that we take from African soil.

We need to think not simply about debt relief, but about the bigger picture and how we alter the terms and conditions of trade and exploitation, which our system is part of. I do not say that in any sense of whipping myself; I say it rationally, because if we are going to make that change, we have to think about that.

I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that I have always been puzzled by the parable of the stewards. I always felt it was little unkind on the perhaps slightly less competent steward with his one talent. I never quite understood why he should be treated so badly, because clearly there was a steward who thought he was doing the best—he buried the talent in the ground, and that talent did not lose any value in that process.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Tony Lloyd: I ask the hon. Gentleman to just let me finish. He thought he was being a good steward. What he lacked was the technical awareness that would have allowed him to invest in whatever—perhaps rare earths or, in those days, fine wine for weddings. In that sense, if we are going to face the challenges together, we have to take that stewardship process. Technical assistance matters enormously.

Jim Shannon: I am not smarter than anyone else, biblically, physically or emotionally. I think the story of the parable is about those who use their talents wisely, and the steward who received five talents used them wisely. The comparison I made was with the economic decisions made by African countries back in 2000. When they did it wisely, their economies grew. Use talents wisely—the five and the two—and the economy will grow. Those who do not use their talents and hide them are not being fair to themselves, their families, or indeed their countries. The point I am trying to make, very gently, is that they could do better.

Tony Lloyd: I agree. Perhaps I should not have picked up on the parable. It is just that I do rail a little bit against the prosperity gospel. It is not my style of Christianity. Compassion is part of what we should be about, and it has to be a part of what we are talking about here today.

I will finish with this. Part of that compassion is that we need to restructure debt and increase trade, but we also need to recognise the capacity to ensure that the

[Tony Lloyd]

steward with the single talent really did need assistance to do the things that the hon. Member for Strangford is talking about, to invest wisely. We need to invest in education and in the technologies that can allow us to challenge climate change in Africa as well as here in the UK, in Europe, in China, and even possibly in the post-Trumpian United States of America—who knows? We have to work together, because in the end this is not about simply asking us all to be kind to each other. It is about a common interest of what kind of world we want to live in. Yes, this is a tremendously important debate we are having today. I hope the Minister will begin to respond in a positive way to the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Slough and others have raised.

3.17 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing what I think has been a very thoughtful and surprisingly theological debate, at a very timely moment in the context of the UK Government publishing their new White Paper. That White Paper presents a very welcome change of tone and perspective on issues of global development. I hope that the language of aid being a giant cash machine in the sky is consigned to the past, and that we can focus on moving forward in a much more constructive and consensual tone. I think that that has been reflected in the debate today.

The same is true of the memories of the Jubilee Debt Campaign, which of course had very deep theological roots of its own, given the biblical concept of a jubilee. I might say again at the end that this is a concept that we perhaps need to come back to. Like the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), I worked with very committed campaigners, some of whom are now constituents, who wrote to whoever their MP was back in the day and who continue to write to me all these years later, because they are so passionate and so motivated. It was such an effective campaign in so many different ways. It went from being Jubilee 2000 to the Jubilee Debt Campaign, and it is now known, as we have heard, as Debt Justice. That is part of a wider movement for a fair economy, for corporate justice, and for climate justice.

It is interesting that whenever the word “justice” is used in the White Paper, it is in the technical, juridical sense relating to a country’s justice systems, rather than in the sense of striving for just, equitable and more peaceful solutions to the challenges that face the modern world. As everybody has said, debt is now one of those biggest challenges. Africa’s debt is at its highest level in over a decade. That is frustrating and disappointing, given all the work and effort that went into setting up the mechanisms for Jubilee 2000 and the Make Poverty History campaign. Progress and huge strides were made for a variety of reasons. Some of those were beyond individual control—such as the likes of the pandemic—but some were very much within our control, such as the way in which multilateral organisations have continued to work, avoidable conflict and, of course, the impact of climate change and the need to respond so quickly, leverage finance and look around to wherever that finance can come from.

That has led to a change in the structure and composition of the debt. Previously, the debt was owed to official creditors, high-income countries and multilateral lenders like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, but now we see China holding a huge proportion of that debt and private creditors making up an increasingly large proportion, as well. At the moment, the debt is not subject to the kinds of structures that were put in place around the millennium, and the effect of that is that the cost of servicing the debt has also increased, and so developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa paid about \$84 billion simply in debt servicing in 2021, with countries in the middle east and north Africa paying a further \$45 billion. We have heard the expression “doom loop” on a number of occasions, from a number of Members, because that just builds and compounds and then has all the effects that a number of Members spoke of so powerfully, affecting the infrastructures of the countries.

The hon. Member for Slough and I were both in Malawi this year—I refer to our entries in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—with the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases. Malawi is one of those 21 African countries we heard about that are in, or at high risk of, debt distress. Its external debt effectively tripled between 2009 and 2021, and we can see the impact of that simply in the country’s inability to get moving; there is a need for infrastructure, and it is simply unable to leverage the resources.

As the hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) so powerfully said, we absolutely want countries to be able to realise the true potential of their riches. Africa is not a poor continent, and African countries are not poor; they are rich in resources and human potential, and yet that potential is not properly realised because they are not in a position to properly and fairly leverage that and they are tied to debt, especially unfair debt. As the hon. Member for Rochdale said, there is this idea of super-abundant extraction of resources through punitive interest rates and unfair deals, which simply compounds that cycle. The DRC should be the richest country in the world. Almost every single person in this Chamber walks around with a little piece of the DRC in our pocket, and yet it is one of the poorest countries in the world and, like so many other countries, it is saddled with debt.

We need fair trade, fair taxation, and a just and sustainable use of the continent’s resources. The responses that have been put forward so far clearly are proving to be inadequate. The analysis has shown that different mechanisms, such as the debt service suspension initiative that was set up in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, have not been fully utilised. The countries that applied to that scheme had an average of just 23% of their debts suspended. The remaining mechanism beyond the DSSI announced in 2020—the common framework for debt treatments—is also incredibly slow; only four countries have so far applied, and none of them has effectively seen any of its debt being cancelled.

Crucial to all of this, as we have heard from some of the contributions, is the lack of co-operation from private sector creditors, both blocking the progress of the countries that are applying and discouraging other countries from applying for those relief processes in the first place. Responsibility has to fall to the UK Government

for a large part of this. There has to be multilateral initiative, and there have to be easier and fairer ways of accessing, financing and writing off or restructuring debt; but getting to the heart of this issue of how private companies are able to extract and apply debt is absolutely crucial. Even though the UK Government are not a massive creditor these days, some 90% of the bonds issued by countries eligible for these debt reliefs are governed by English law. The Government say in the White Paper that they want to pioneer new approaches to debt, so they should listen carefully to the proposals being put forward.

I was saying to a colleague earlier today that it is unlikely that legislation will come out of the White Paper, as it is really a statement of Government policy, but here we are in Westminster Hall a couple of hours later talking about firm proposals for legislation on the back of it, put forward by the Debt Justice campaign—the hon. Member for Putney spoke about those. They would have a number of practical effects, including easing the debt restructuring process by undermining the ability of minority creditors to hold out on agreements, easing financial settlements for debtor Governments in distress, increasing the speed of restructuring processes, reducing uncertainty for debtor countries and creditors, enabling borrowing Governments to access capital markets more quickly, and addressing the power imbalance between the single debtor country and often a large number of creditors.

It would be interesting and useful to hear the Minister commit at the very least to consult on what such legislation might look like and speak about how it could be taken forward practically. Of course, it would have to be taken forward in parallel, because there would not be much point in the UK legislating if all the debts transfer to another jurisdiction—New York is the other very popular area for binding these kinds of contracts. It would have to be an international initiative.

I wonder whether we need to think in the even longer term. The White Paper is supposed to take us to the sustainable development goals in 2030. The year 2000 was a jubilee year, which is a biblical concept—debts were written off and everybody had a fresh start—and Pope Francis has designated 2025 as a holy year of jubilee for the Catholic Church, but perhaps we need to think in the longer term about where we will be in the middle of the century. Will we continue in this doom loop, or will we seize the opportunity now to make progress towards the sustainable development goals and go beyond them to create a fairer, more just and more equitable system? Tackling pervasive debt absolutely has to be a part of that. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others said—this is in the Debt Justice campaign material—people struggle with huge amounts of debt in the United Kingdom and other western countries. As the hon. Member for Leicester East said, we effectively end up in hock to incredibly powerful companies, and that affects the dignity of countries as a whole and the dignity and power of individuals.

If we do not rise to the challenge, the other goals—everything else in the White Paper and the sustainable development goals—will remain exactly that: goals and targets. They will never actually be realised because the money will continue to spiral and line the pockets of people who already have more than enough at the expense of people who do not even have enough to get by.

That is the challenge before us. This has been an incredibly thoughtful and useful debate, and I hope, in the new spirit of consensus that the Government have set today with the publication of the White Paper, that the Minister and the Labour spokesperson will respond appropriately, and that we can find just and sustainable solutions to the challenge of debt in Africa.

3.28 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I sincerely thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing the debate. His record of standing up for people affected by crises in Africa and around the world speaks for itself—it is absolutely exemplary. He and I agree that working with African countries to address their concerns, challenges and opportunities is very important. As we know, Africa's potential is massive. It has young, dynamic, talented, fast-growing populations, but African economies are being held back by climate heating, disasters, conflict and debt.

Debt sustainability is a terribly complex issue once we get into the details, but on one level it is very simple: Governments hamstrung by debt burdens cannot meet their people's needs or aspirations. Currently, uncertainty around debt is driving away investment and undermining many African countries' economic growth and climate progress. The average debt ratio in sub-Saharan Africa has nearly doubled over the past decade, going from 30% of GDP in 2013 to almost 60% last year. The cost of debt has become far more expensive, and even before recent crises, it was far higher than for higher-income countries.

Many countries are recovering from the economic damage wreaked by covid, climate shocks and conflicts, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine, so it is not surprising that 20 African countries are either in debt distress or at high risk of it. We have already seen the attempts of four African states to manage huge debts thwarted by the slow and cumbersome common framework process.

Ghana, for example—one of our key partners in Africa—is cut off from international markets while debt negotiations go on and on. Ghana cannot reap the full rewards of its resources and enormous human potential, and we in the UK cannot access the mutual benefits that would flow from its growth. The Bridgetown initiative, the Nairobi declaration and key figures at the International Monetary Fund are calling on us to speed up debt relief talks and make the global debt system fairer and more efficient.

I am pleased to see the Government's international development White Paper recognise the need to improve global debt processes, but there are obviously huge questions about the Government's commitment to take the necessary steps if we are actually going to do that. As we know, one of the problems with the common framework is that a small number of private creditors can hold up the entire process by refusing to take part in restructuring, in the hope of securing a higher return than others. We know that many of those private creditors operate under English law, because of the strength of the City of London in global finance. It would be helpful to hear from the Minister whether her Government have changed their position since May.

[Ms Lyn Brown]

Will the Minister review the benefits and risks of legislating to stop creditors from acting in bad faith and holding up negotiations? Does she agree that the Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Act 2010 did not have the negative unintended consequences that some feared it would? When the international development White Paper was being developed, why did the Government not see the cross-party consensus behind that Act as a starting point to build on over the coming years? Surely recognising the UK's history of action and outsized role in private sovereign debt could strengthen our influence and credibility at the G20 and other international fora. It could enable us to work better with the United States, opening up opportunities for co-ordinated reform. It could supplement our efforts to improve multilateral systems and debt transparency.

In her response, I can guess the Minister might talk about the good work being done to roll out climate resilient debt clauses, but does she recognise that those clauses will not be enough on their own? It is not only countries in the grip of an extreme weather event, or a health disaster, that will need fiscal space. In many African countries, the huge swings in global interest rates and commodity prices are equally relevant.

The international development White Paper states that the Government will support suspensions of debt payments while negotiations are ongoing, and, "where relevant". I would be grateful if the Minister said more about what the Government mean by "where relevant", and what they are doing about bringing back consensus on debt service repayment suspensions at the G20. Does she agree that suspensions can speed up negotiations, which is surely in all our interests?

The Minister knows that calls have been made for the UK to use our influence at the IMF to produce a definition of unsustainable debt for the common framework. In May, her Government rejected those calls when the International Development Committee recommended action. Perhaps she could say a little about what she is doing to make the definition of unsustainable debt clearer and how she is helping to make progress more predictable.

I know that the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), understands the need for action, from his very welcome comments about vulture funds over the past months. The international development White Paper mentions support for voluntary collective action clauses and majority voting provisions. Does the Minister here today agree that those have not fully solved the problems caused by vulture funds?

When I speak to African ambassadors, Ministers, business leaders and civil society groups, they are clear about what they want from the UK: partnership, not patronage. I heard the same message last week in Kenya. When we talk about our collaboration with African countries, it is not just about development assistance or private investment—as the Minister knows, we would love to see more of both. It is equally about structural reform and smart collaboration with our partners. For example, I know that the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield, has recently been working hard on the global food security summit. I gently say that if we did more to unblock the common framework process, that would free up funds for African countries to spend on their food security agendas.

We all recognise the role of humanitarian aid. It saves lives in massive numbers and is absolutely essential, but we know that supporting resilient food systems that prevent hunger and malnutrition would be a far better way to proceed. At very little cost to ourselves, we could take steps to make sure that the processes we influence, such as the global sovereign debt system, really do provide fair benefits to us and to the countries that use them. We recognise that these issues are complex and sometimes genuinely difficult, but none of us wants to undermine the basis for future private bilateral and multilateral investment in African countries. The mutual benefits and the need for such investments are huge. However, we need to seriously consider the argument that greater confidence in comparability of treatment between private and official creditors will not undermine investment; instead, it could enable investment by creating more transparency and certainty.

These debates are technical, but they are also really important for hundreds of millions of people. It took three very long years after Zambia's default for a debt restructuring even to be agreed in principle. Even worse, the process is far from over. The issue of comparability of treatment between official creditors and bondholders is a core barrier holding Zambia back.

Doing our bit to solve the debt crisis is essential to being a good partner to our friends. It affects the UK's long-term interests. Let me stick with Zambia for a moment: we are talking about a country that is likely to play a massive role in the global green energy transition through its wealth in copper and other critical minerals. By being a positive partner to Zambia, we can demonstrate the serious offer we have to growing countries across Africa and support progress on security, democracy and human rights in the wider southern and central Africa regions.

We have already seen Zambian leadership on these issues, through their role in election monitoring in Zimbabwe, for example. That is the positive side—opportunities can be seized. However, there is a negative side, too, because the debt crisis is one of the background factors that enables insecurity to grow in many African countries. Where Governments cannot provide services to their populations, people are left alienated and hopeless. We know that insurgencies, coups and armed groups thrive where trust and hope has vanished. By speeding up restructuring processes, we could do something to address the root causes of insecurity in Africa, at little cost to the Treasury.

When it comes to the threats that face us, the biggest is climate heating. Whether Africa makes its green transition in a fair and timely way matters to the UK, as we all live on the same planet, and there is enormous potential to mitigate and adapt to climate change across the continent. However, the funding is not there, and the international development White Paper acknowledges that it cannot all come from international assistance or private sector investment. We have to free up African public funds if climate change is to be tackled in a joined-up, strategic way—the same way we plan to tackle it here in the UK.

The Government's White Paper acknowledges some of the harms done by our failing global debt system. That is truly welcome, but I hope the Minister agrees that what we need to do now is go beyond acknowledgement and act, because there is no more time for us to lose.

3.40 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I apologise for my slightly tardy arrival earlier, Mr Vickers; it is a real pleasure to be here. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing this timely debate, and I pay tribute to his work as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on extreme poverty. This is such an important area, and I am also grateful for the thoughtful contributions from all hon. Members. I will try my best to respond to all the points raised, but I will ensure that officials write if I miss any or do not have the full information at my fingertips.

The Minister for Development and Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), wanted to be here, but his responsibilities meant that he had to make a statement in the main Chamber on the White Paper today, as colleagues have mentioned, so it is a pleasure for me to respond on his behalf.

I want to pull out a couple of points that the Minister made in that statement. When speaking about the important role that development has played in transforming the lives of billions of people, he said:

“The UK can be immensely proud of our distinct contribution to this incredible success story. Two centuries ago, three quarters of the world lived in extreme poverty. When I was born, around half still did. By 2015, when the world met the millennium development goals, the proportion of a much larger global population had fallen to just 12%.”

Development does work, but as we all see, and as thoughtful contributions from hon. Members today have highlighted, after decades of hard-won, persistent progress, we are now living in a world facing a daunting set of new challenges. We are seeing rising poverty, and the UN sustainable development goals are nearly all off track for 2030. We are all cognisant of the challenges, and this timely debate, which focuses on a potential enabler of successful development if the world can make more progress on these debt issues, is an important one.

As colleagues have set out, debt is a major concern for many developing countries, not least those in Africa. I spend most of my time speaking as the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, and some of the big challenges are also clearly seen there. Recent trends paint a sobering picture. Debt levels in Africa are at their highest since the early 2000s, with debt repayments due in 2024 estimated to be six times greater than they were in 2021. Twenty-one of the continent’s 38 low-income countries are now either in debt distress or at high risk of entering debt distress in the next few years. Low-income countries are also increasingly exposed to a wider range of creditors. For example, Chinese debt accounted for 18% of their external debt in 2020, up from only 2% in 2006.

The debt burden of African countries rose over the decade leading up to the pandemic, and it was stoked significantly by the challenges of covid and the impact of Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, disrupting prices for oil, grain and fertiliser. That has led to greater demands for borrowing, rising interest rates and huge pressures on spending and services. According to the UN, between 2019 and 2021, 25 African countries—nearly half the continent—spent more on interest payments than on health.

As colleagues have set out, successive UK Governments, regardless of political colour, have played an important leadership role on international debt over recent decades,

from the work done to establish the heavily indebted poor countries initiative in the 1990s to the Gleneagles G8 summit in 2005, for instance. To date, the UK has cancelled £2 billion of debt under these initiatives, and the international community collectively has agreed cancellations worth more than \$100 billion. The Government have continued to adapt our approach in recent years in response to the evolving debt pressures on lower-income countries.

When the pandemic hit, we worked rapidly with G20 partners to establish the debt service suspension initiative, which deferred around \$13 billion of debt repayments to the G20 and Paris Club. In November 2020, the G20 and Paris Club agreed to a new common framework, as colleagues have noted, to provide debt restructuring and relief to countries that require it. Although two countries—Chad and Zambia, as mentioned by colleagues—have reached restructuring agreements with official bilateral creditors through the new common framework, I think we would all agree that progress has been far too slow.

I will update colleagues on the specifics of UK debt relief; the figures are greater than some quoted by Members. We have provided £1.4 billion through the multilateral debt relief initiative, £150 million through the IMF’s catastrophe containment and relief trust, and roughly £600 million bilaterally as part of the HIPC initiative. So we are leading the way, and we have set out, in a number of areas, our new approach to debt and development in our international development White Paper.

First, we have committed to work with our partners to reshape and reform the debt architecture so that it is fit to address today’s challenges. We will push for the common framework to be more co-ordinated, predictable, transparent—which is important—and timely. We will use the UK’s position on official creditor committees, both within and outside the framework, to help return countries to debt sustainability. We will push more forcefully for the timely conclusion of debt treatments, including debt standstills, where relevant. Importantly, of course, this is a G20 initiative, built on consensus, and delays by some members, such as China, make the pace all the more challenging to achieve.

Secondly, we will ensure that key debt management tools are fit for purpose. That includes, for example, updating the IMF’s debt sustainability frameworks to take account of the impact of climate change—obviously, that is a critical element and many colleagues have highlighted it today—and the investments needed to address it and drive the adaptation and resilience programmes that are needed to support countries.

Thirdly, we will push forward best practice with the private sector, which now accounts for 19% of the foreign debt owed by low-income countries. We will encourage them to introduce contractual innovations, including climate resilient debt clauses, which pause repayments when a shock hits, such as a flood or cyclone. We have pioneered the use of such clauses in our lending agreements, enhancing the ability of developing countries to respond to external shocks. We want to see such clauses rolled out across private and official sector lending. We will encourage the private sector to embrace majority voting provisions in debt contracts to facilitate better outcomes in debt restructurings.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

Fourthly, we will support debtor countries. We will continue to champion their voice in fora such as the global sovereign debt roundtable and we will work to find other ways to strengthen their voice. We will also help them to strengthen their debt management capacity with support from our new centre of expertise on public finance and tax.

Finally, we will champion greater debt transparency to build creditor confidence and keep borrowing costs down. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), highlighted that one of the really difficult and continuing challenges is that the risk profile adds yet another layer.

We in the UK are very proud of our record of transparency as a lender. In 2021, we became the first G7 country to publish details of all new Government lending on a quarterly basis, and we have secured a commitment from other G7 countries to do the same. We will continue to work to push transparency further, reporting on our adherence to the G20 guidelines for sustainable financing, and encouraging the private sector and lending and borrowing countries to disclose their debt agreements properly.

Alongside those five steps to address unsustainable debt levels directly, we are working to help countries to avoid debt distress. The UK Government have a strong track record in helping developing countries to collect more tax and manage their public finances. We will encourage Governments, through the responsible infrastructure investment campaign, to demonstrate that all major infrastructure projects are economically viable and have been competitively tendered.

Jim Shannon: If I have heard her correctly, the Minister has outlined a number of ways forward. Time is of the essence. Many of these countries are in extreme debt. I, along with others, am keen to get a timescale for when those debt decisions could be made and when those countries could move away from where they are. Is that possible? Can the Minister please do that?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Member challenges me on something that I cannot give him an answer to. I will ensure that the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, comes back to him and that that conversation can continue in more detail. I hope that is helpful. I am not the expert in the detail of this so I will ask my right hon. Friend to make sure that the issue is highlighted. To the hon. Member for Strangford's point, I should say that none of this is immediately resolvable; it is very much around a consensus effort through international partners. However, I will ensure my right hon. Friend gets back to hon. Members accordingly.

As part of our work, we continue to support the debt sustainability challenge by encouraging international financial institutions to scale up their support for the poorest and most vulnerable countries, which are particularly in Africa. We are a leading donor to the multilateral development banks that provide countries with more affordable concessional finance and have announced UK guarantees over the last two years that will unlock more than \$2.6 billion in additional finance for African countries.

We have delivered on our commitment to channel a further \$5.6 billion of our share of the IMF's historic issuance of \$650 billion of special drawing rights to the IMF's concessional lending facilities to support vulnerable countries. Perhaps the biggest prize of all is stretching the balance sheets of our MDBs to get more from their existing resources. They could potentially deliver an extra \$300 billion to \$400 billion over the next decade by implementing the G20 capital adequacy review recommendations. We will continue to push them to do so.

The hon. Member for Slough highlighted the critical challenge that we all face in supporting women and girls, who are so often at the end of the line on funding, education, healthcare and, indeed, tools and investments to help them make the climate adaptation they need in their communities. That is why the international women and girls strategy, which we published earlier in the year, sets out clear commitments with more than £2.5 billion of live official development aid programmes at the moment for women and girls in Africa. The strategy also commits at least 30% of the FCDO's bilateral aid programmes to focus on gender and equality through to 2030, which is absolutely at the heart of our commitment to the way we want to deliver those development aims.¹

To conclude, we absolutely recognise the serious challenges that debt poses for countries in Africa. That is why the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, set out in the international development White Paper a wide-ranging and comprehensive approach to address them. I thank colleagues for their thoughtful comments and their cross-party support for the work that my right hon. Friend has set out. By building on progress in the common framework, innovating alongside private creditors and working to encourage debt transparency and sustainable lending, the Government will work to ensure that unmanageable debt is swiftly restructured so that countries can develop sustainably.

3.53 pm

Mr Dhesi: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, for what has been a thoughtful and emotive debate. I thank all hon. Members for their commendable contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) drew on her enormous experience as a long-standing campaigner who has worked in the field, asking the Government for effective legislation to address the issues. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about how we need to help African countries out of their difficult patch. He spoke about having compassion and realism when restructuring debts, because the United Kingdom must be a supportive nation. The hon. Member for Leicester East (Claudia Webbe) spoke at length about the legacy of colonialism and the exploitation of mineral extraction. She said that wealth is not benefiting local people and asked for debt cancellation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd), who has substantial knowledge and experience in this area, said that the debt crisis is real. In his eloquent way, he said that debt is an enslavement of future generations. He said that the battles against global poverty and other ills are being lost, that we must be a true partner to our African friends and that we must work together.

1. [Official Report, 4 December 2023, Vol. 742, c. 2MC.]

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), mentioned our recent visit to Africa, where we looked into the effects of malaria and neglected tropical diseases, and at how the growth of African nations is being hampered. We spoke at length to other stakeholders about that. He spoke about the need for co-operation from private sector creditors that are charging higher interest rates, which the Government need to address.

The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), said that Africa has a young, dynamic population. She said that although the international development White Paper is a welcome sign, our collective plea is that the Government must show commitment and compassion to deliver.

We need to break the downward doom loop of debt in Africa. There is so much potential in Africa, but we must help our friends there—yes, our friends and fellow human beings—to achieve that aim.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of debt in Africa.

3.57 pm

Sitting suspended.

RAAC: St Leonard's, Durham

4 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete at St Leonard's Catholic School, City of Durham.

I welcome the Minister to his place; I know that the right hon. Gentleman has a great deal of experience at the Department for Education and I look forward to working with him to resolve the situation at St Leonard's. I note that only a week into his role he has already offered to meet me, and I thank him for that. That is far more than his predecessor offered.

There are four purposes to this debate. The first is to bring the Minister up to speed with the situation; the second is to ensure that there are no delays to building the temporary structures; the third is to deliver justice to the parents and pupils at the school; and the last is to accelerate the promised and much deserved rebuild of St Leonard's.

First, I will supply a bit of history. In 2010, the then Education Secretary scrapped the Building Schools for the Future programme—something that he later regretted. Although that contrition from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is welcome, let's face it: he is not the one suffering the consequences of a crumbling school—unlike the parents, pupils and teachers in my constituency, who were shocked when St Leonard's was ordered to close just days before the autumn term began, due to the presence of RAAC.

Parts of St Leonard's remain shut, 11 weeks on. That has had a serious impact on the lives of my constituents and the children at the school. I will shortly share some of the comments I have received from parents. This is an extremely important year for pupils in year 11 and the sixth-form students in year 13—a crucial year for GCSEs and A-levels. So far, the Government have offered no dispensation for those pupils, who have had more than 11 weeks of their education disrupted.

Let us not forget that, for those studying design and technology, music, sciences and specialist subjects, the disruptions are ongoing: there are no labs, no music rooms and no workshops available. Instead, pupils are being taught in a noisy sports hall and in classes of up to 60. In addition, Ofqual has told me that it is

“not in a position to agree adaptations”

even though items such as coursework and school books were not retrieved from the old building until 27 October. Full face-to-face learning did not commence until 30 October, with parts of the school remaining shut now. It is clearly nonsense that, on the one hand, pupils would be allowed mitigating circumstances if a fire alarm went off in the school during an exam, but, on the other, they are denied exemptions if their schooling has been disrupted for more than 11 weeks.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, many pupils at St Leonard's travel from North Durham. I have had representations similar to the ones she has received from parents about the effect on exams. Does she agree that, in spite of that, some of the teachers are doing great work in trying to overcome

[Mr Kevan Jones]

the difficulties? They are seriously concerned about the effects of the disruption on those children's exam results next year.

Mary Kelly Foy: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. The staff have been working under such difficult circumstances. They have seen first hand the effect the situation is having on their pupils, who have worked so hard. We should remember that they are pupils who also suffered through the pandemic. We are urging the Minister to do all he can. I implore him to change Ofqual's refusal to make any mitigations. He could perhaps amend the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009, or give a one-off dispensation to the pupils in years 11 and 13—anything to help these pupils and their families.

I must mention a pupil at St Leonard's, Henry Hague, who bravely questioned the Department for Education officials when they visited the school. Henry asked, "Will our difficulties be recognised for A-level and GCSE results?" The DFE said no. What message is that sending to Henry's generation? It is that the Government are not prepared to help them and that their departmental officials gloss over this injustice. The King's Speech stated:

"Steps will be taken to ensure young people have the knowledge and skills to succeed".

Does that include the nearly 1,500 pupils at St Leonard's? It does not seem that way.

Eleven weeks on, parents, pupils and teachers are fed up—fed up with the additional costs and the additional stresses that this situation has put them in. I do not blame them; I would feel exactly the same in their position. To add insult to injury, the school has been asking the DFE to intervene for years. It even lobbied the then Schools Minister, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), in 2017, but nothing came of it.

I have read that if the Tory-led Government—and let us not forget the Liberal Democrats, who supported this as well—had kept the Building Schools for the Future programme, every single school with RAAC, including St Leonard's, would have been rebuilt by this year. I urge the Minister to lobby the Treasury and No. 10 to reintroduce that programme; perhaps the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities can join him.

I now turn to the comments that I have received from parents. Time does not permit me to share everything, but I want to challenge the new Schools Minister. I know that he has only been in the role for a week, but I ask him to please come to Durham and speak to the parents himself, not just to selected groups, and demonstrate to my constituents that he is on their side and will get this mess cleared up as soon as possible. What my constituents and their children are going through is an injustice. There are no other words to describe it. Parents at St Leonard's appreciated that Baroness Barran visited and told us that money would be no object, but now they feel like they have been abandoned.

Parents are extremely concerned about the mental wellbeing of their children—not only that, but some have said that their child's mental health is in decline. Let us not forget that there are additional pressures on

children with special educational needs and disabilities, and for children who receive free school meals. I am really concerned because they receive only packed lunches at the moment, rather than hot meals.

This has taken a toll on the mental health of the parents, too. Both parents and pupils are worried about catching up due to lost time in the classroom. They are worried about exams and about the future, especially when so many of these pupils already had their educations disrupted by the pandemic. Parents have also told me that they are having to fork out for private tuition for their kids, and, to compound this stress, they are having to organise childcare and rearrange their own work schedules. Other issues, such as transport, are also eating into teaching time as pupils now have to travel to new locations. That is not at all helped by the greedy bosses at Go North East. Perhaps the Minister could have a word with his colleagues at the Department for Transport and encourage them to give bus drivers the pay rise that they deserve.

I must say that the parents, pupils, and teachers—and all the school staff—have amazed me with their resilience. It is privilege to represent them here. If only previous Ministers demonstrated the same fortitude as my constituents. On that note, I turn to ministerial accountability—or the lack of it. We had a statement from the Secretary of State for Education at the beginning of September, but that was the last proactive statement made by the DFE on the subject in this House.

Ministers had to be summoned via urgent questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson). Although we can use named day questions to hold Ministers to account, those are useful only if Departments actually answer them. On issues such as free school meals, I received copy-and-paste replies. On other issues, I never even received a response prior to Prorogation. Responses to my named day questions in the last Session were late, and in this Session one was over a week late. However, I note that the Minister provided a response a few hours ago.

In addition, there was a written statement on school funding in the final week before Prorogation, and again the then Minister had to be summoned to the House via an urgent question. I hope you will agree, Mr Vickers, that this is not a dry procedural issue; it matters to my constituents and their children. In this Session, the DFE and other Departments must up their game and show my constituents the respect they deserve.

I want to finish with some asks. On costs, can we please speed up the process of remunerating the trust? Although I am aware at the Government have paid some of the costs up front, including for Ushaw College, the trust has spent more than £500,000 for critical services, and only £50,000 has been reimbursed so far.

Mr Kevan Jones: St Benet's in Ouston in my constituency of North Durham is affected by reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. It is a feeder school for St Leonard's, and no commitment has yet been given about whether it will be rebuilt. Pupils are already leaving the school, and its budget next year and, ultimately, the feed into St Leonard's will be affected by that. Does my hon. Friend agree that early decisions need to be made about whether St Benet's will be rebuilt, and that it should be compensated next year for the fall in pupils?

Mary Kelly Foy: I could not agree more. The school and the trust are very concerned that pupil numbers will be low next year for obvious reasons. That is partly due to some pupils wanting to move to other schools and partly because the feeder schools are understandably choosing to go elsewhere. We need some assurance about a timeline for getting things somewhere near back to normal, and about what will happen with the St Benet's rebuild.

Will the Minister please offer a dispensation for pupils in years 11 and 13? Amend the 2009 Act, make a one-off exemption—anything. I would also appreciate it if he would address support for children on free school meals and the lack of hot food.

Finally, I reiterate my challenge to the new Schools Minister: come to Durham, speak to the parents and pupils of St Leonard's, and let us sort this mess out together.

4.12 pm

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Vickers, I think for the first time as I respond to a debate in Westminster Hall—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): The second.

Damian Hinds: The second. I thank the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and congratulate her on securing a debate on this important subject.

The Government are committed to ensuring that every child in the country gets a first-class education and every opportunity to make the very best of their abilities. I understand that parents, schools and this House are concerned about reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, and we are moving decisively to address it while minimising the disruption to education. Before I come to St Leonard's Catholic School, I want to set out why we are taking this cautious approach to RAAC and how the Government are supporting schools and colleges across England.

Professional advice from technical experts on RAAC has evolved over time, and the managing its risks across all sectors has spanned successive Governments since 1994. Although local authorities, academy trusts and other bodies are directly responsible for school buildings, and we fund them as such, we have taken a direct and proactive approach to RAAC.

We have been talking to schools about the potential risks of RAAC since 2018, when we first published a warning note with the Local Government Association, which asked all responsible bodies to identify any properties constructed using RAAC and to ensure that RAAC properties are regularly inspected by a structural engineer. In February 2021, we issued a guide on identifying it. Concerned that not all responsible bodies were acting quickly enough, in 2022 we decided to take a more direct approach. Last year, we issued a questionnaire to responsible bodies to ask them to identify whether they had or suspected that they had RAAC, and started a significant programme of technical surveys. We have been sending professional surveyors to schools and colleges in England to assess whether RAAC is present. We have eight survey firms contracted to deliver technical surveys to all schools and colleges that have advised us that they suspect they might have RAAC, so that we can rapidly confirm whether it is indeed present.

Although building maintenance is the duty of councils, academy trusts and voluntary-aided school bodies, RAAC cases over the summer reduced the Department for Education's confidence that school and college buildings with confirmed RAAC should remain in use without mitigations being put in place. Following careful analysis of those cases, we made a precautionary and proactive change. On 31 August, we updated our guidance to schools and colleges so that areas previously deemed to contain non-critical RAAC are now taken out of use until mitigations are put in place. Professional guidance makes it clear that wherever RAAC is found, it needs to be monitored closely. The technical guidance does not say that mitigations need to be put in place in all buildings that contain RAAC.

As of 16 October, responsible bodies had submitted responses to our questionnaire for 99.9% of schools and colleges with blocks built in the target era, and DFE has since resolved the remaining 17. Any required surveys of potential RAAC cases are carried out by one of eight professional survey firms, and the vast majority of schools surveyed to date have been found to have no RAAC. As of 16 October, 214 education settings had confirmed RAAC in some of their buildings. Thanks to the hard work of school and college leaders, 202 settings—94%—are providing full-time face-to-face education for all pupils, while 12 have hybrid arrangements that may involve some remote learning on some days. We are supporting these education settings to put in place mitigation plans, and the majority have now returned to full-time face-to-face education or will do so very shortly.

We will do everything in our power to support schools and colleges in responding to RAAC in their buildings. Every school or college with confirmed RAAC is assigned dedicated support from one of 80 caseworkers. Project delivery teams are onsite to support schools and colleges to implement mitigation plans. They will work with them to put in place a bespoke plan that supports face-to-face education for all pupils as soon as possible, based on their circumstances. There is not a one-size-fits-all mitigation plan, and what is right for a school or college will depend on a number of individual local factors. Mitigation plans include using other spaces on the school site, in nearby schools or elsewhere in the local area until structural works are carried out or temporary buildings are installed.

The Government are funding the emergency work needed to mitigate the presence of RAAC, including installing alternative classroom space where necessary. All reasonable requests for additional help with revenue costs, such as transport to other locations or temporarily renting local premises, are being approved. The Government are funding longer-term refurbishment or rebuilding projects to address the presence of RAAC in schools. Schools and colleges will be offered either capital grants to fund refurbishment work to permanently remove RAAC, or rebuilding projects where these are needed, including through the school rebuilding programme. The requirements for each school or college will vary depending on the extent of RAAC and the nature and design of the buildings, and we are working closely with responsible bodies to assess what the right solution is in each case.

I recognise the challenges being faced by the staff and pupils at schools that have had to vacate space due to the presence of RAAC, including St Leonard's Catholic

[Damian Hinds]

School in the hon. Lady's constituency. As she will know, a particular challenge for St Leonard's is the prevalence of RAAC in the school's buildings, which has resulted in a significant proportion of them being taken out of use while mitigations are put in place. I thank the headteacher and all the staff at St Leonard's for their hard work in supporting their pupils through this time. I recognise the pressure staff have been under, and I am committed to continuing to work with the school on how we can support it to respond to RAAC and minimise any disruption to education. The Department has been working closely with the school to implement mitigation plans in order to ensure that face-to-face education can continue for all pupils. This has involved structural works to some of the buildings in addition to arranging alternative, offsite accommodation. We have supported the trust in bringing pupils back into face-to-face learning as quickly as possible to lessen the impact on education. All pupils at St Leonard's, as the hon. Lady said, have been in full-time face-to-face education since October.

Temporary classrooms are being installed on the school's playing fields. RAAC has impacted on many of the specialist facilities, as she rightly said, including science labs, IT rooms and D&T areas. We continue to explore options for the delivery of those specialist places as soon as possible.

Pupils due to sit exams next year are currently using specialist facilities at other providers in the local area, with transport provided for pupils. We are working closely with the school to identify how all pupils can have access to specialist facilities. We have provided assistance and facilitated sector support to ensure that children at St Leonard's have not been disadvantaged, prioritising pupils in examination years. Crucially, we are working with the school on extra education support for pupils. That includes sourcing extra teaching capacity at St Leonard's with an educational support programme that may include tutoring available for pupils this term.

Qualification-awarding organisations have been working and continue to work with schools including St Leonard's, although they may have specific difficulties in delivering assessments due to specialist classrooms being unavailable for a time. Awarding organisations have discretion to grant extensions to deadlines for non-examination assessment or coursework, based on a school's specific circumstances, and will offer as much flexibility as they can when considering such steps. I know that St Leonard's is meeting one of the awarding organisations with which it works tomorrow, and another is hoping to meet St Leonard's later this week.

As I set out earlier, the Government are funding the emergency work needed to mitigate the presence of RAAC, and all reasonable requests for additional help with revenue costs are being approved. I note what the hon. Lady said about the timeliness of so doing. I will follow up on that, and we will have a chance to discuss it when we meet.

We are supporting St Leonard's specifically on the funding of temporary classrooms on the school site, we are funding the use of specialist facilities at other providers in the local area, and we will continue to work with St Leonard's on what further support may be needed.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Does he not also realise that the trust has a problem because, at the feeder school that I mentioned in my constituency, St Benet's, pupils are already leaving and next year's roll is going to go down, so St Leonard's will have difficulty recruiting students next year? Will any compensation be given to the trust and the individual schools because their rolls have gone down through no fault of their own?

Damian Hinds: I will follow up separately with the right hon. Gentleman about St Benet's specifically, and we can discuss it further. On overall funding, he will know that there is an established system whereby funding follows the pupil. In the case of St Leonard's—I was going to come on to this exact point—there is also the prospect of the rebuilding to come, which is a great positive for the school. St Leonard's is set to be rebuilt as part of our 10-year school rebuilding programme, which, overall, will transform hundreds of schools across England. In the meantime, we will continue to support the school in mitigating the impact of confirmed RAAC.

I am grateful for all the extensive time that the hon. Member for City of Durham has given to this matter, including to this debate. I look forward to meeting her—I believe we will do so next week—to discuss the support for St Leonard's in more detail. I reassure pupils, parents and staff that the Government are doing whatever it takes to support our schools and colleges in responding to RAAC and minimising the disruption to education. I specifically want to thank the team and staff at St Leonard's for their hard work in responding to RAAC. The Government have been working and will continue to work closely with affected schools and colleges, including St Leonard's, to support them, to mitigate affected spaces and to minimise disruption to children's learning.

Question put and agreed to.

4.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Autism and Learning Disability Training

[*Relevant documents: e-petition 639050, Require education staff to be trained on learning disabilities and autism; e-petition 638530, Mandatory training for teachers to understand ADHD & autism; e-petition 634354, Require Universities to Train Staff on Neurodiversity.*]

4.30 pm

Dame Caroline Dinéage (Gosport) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered autism and learning disability training for education staff.

It is a great pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I am grateful to have been allocated parliamentary time to discuss the very important issue of autism and learning disability training for education staff. The debate arises in response to three e-petitions: petition 639050, which calls for education staff to be required to have trained in learning disability and autism and which has received over 69,000 signatories; petition 638530, which calls for mandatory training for teachers in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism and which has 1,500 signatories; and petition 634354, which calls for training on neurodiversity for university staff and which has over 16,000 signatories.

I thank everyone who took time to sign the petitions, which clearly relate to issues that are of huge concern to people across the country. I also thank the nearly 3,000 people who contributed to the Commons engagement team survey and gave their views on more education staff training. Some of the stories which they have shared with us have been exceptionally troubling. I am grateful for the time and effort that has gone into communicating those stories, which in some cases involved sharing very painful experiences.

There are around 200,000 autistic pupils in England and nearly 75% of them are in mainstream schools. According to research by the National Autistic Society, only a tiny proportion—just 26%—of autistic pupils feel happy at school. Three in four parents or carers—74%—said that their child's school place did not fully meet their needs, and more than one in four parents, or 26%, waited over three years to receive support for their child.

Autistic children often speak of feeling misunderstood and of school being a place where there is bullying and loneliness. Such experiences lead to issues with mental wellbeing, sometimes to self-harm, and to a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. The responses to the engagement survey starkly support the claim that autistic children do not always have a positive experience at school. In fact, in cases in which things go badly wrong, autistic children not only miss out on their education, but have experiences that can haunt them throughout their lives—stealing their future prospects, leaving them struggling to get into or stay in the workplace, and driving very distressing health impacts. Those detrimental effects can continue well into adulthood.

Deborah, the mother of one autistic child, said:

“After nine years of experiencing the school system...she removed her son completely and started home education so that they could mend his mental health and school-caused trauma.”

One mother told us of the

“Huge emotional impact”

that had

“led to serious mental health issues and withdrawal from education and society as a whole.”

She stated that her child's experience had

“led to isolation, complete withdrawal from any form of education and reluctance to interact across all levels of society.”

The National Autistic Society's education rights helpline has seen a huge spike in calls related to college and university education.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward the debate. All of us have an interest in autism, and I know that others have a personal interest in it, but we are here to support the hon. Lady. Back in 2020, the former Education Minister in Northern Ireland—now Lord Weir in the other place—published an enhanced autism training programme. The hon. Lady referred to universities, and it is important to note that it is not only children who are affected by autism. Does she agree that the same considerations from that report must apply to colleges and universities across the UK, so that older students who suffer from autism have the same support as those in schools? I think the hon. Lady's answer will be yes, but I am curious about her response.

Dame Caroline Dinéage: The hon. Gentleman anticipates correctly and, as ever, makes an important contribution to the debate. That is why we are discussing a petition, which over 16,000 people signed and which calls for university students to be included and for the education to go up as far as university lecturers and other university staff.

Before I go any further, I want to say that this is not a problem with teachers per se. This debate is not about attacking the teaching profession nor is it meant in any way to undermine or criticise teachers and other education professionals. We know that teachers up and down the country do a remarkable and very important job, in many cases in increasingly challenging circumstances. Teachers are passionate about supporting their pupils. They want to give them the very best possible educational experience and the best life chances, but they need the right support to do that. This debate is about ensuring that teachers are given the best tools and advice they need to give autistic and neurodivergent children, children with a learning disability and, in fact, all the students they care for the best possible support and the best possible chance to have a happy, healthy and safe learning environment.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall and bringing together these petitions. Does she agree that we already have a precedent in the Health and Care Act 2022, which finally mandated training for health and social care professionals using the Oliver McGowan training programme? With the Autism Education Trust, we have a potential model that could be strategically rolled out to replicate the approach we are taking in health and social care in all fields of education.

Dame Caroline Dinéage: It is almost as if my right hon. and learned Friend read my mind. I will come on in a bit to talk about the Oliver McGowan training, which I am glad he endorses. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on autism, he speaks with enormous experience and passion on this subject, and I am grateful for his endorsement.

[*Dame Caroline Dinéage*]

As we have heard, there is already training in this area, which I am sure the Minister will reiterate. However, a report by the National Autistic Society showed that just one in seven—14%—of schoolteachers have received any form of autism training. Rachel, a SEND learning support assistant, said, in her words, that she had “not really received much training”, and that when she started, she “was thrown into the deep end.”

Everything Rachel knows is mainly based on her experience of working with SEN children, not her training, yet the survey responses show that where teaching and support are right, they can have a game-changing and enduring impact on the education and life chances of neurodivergent pupils, in some cases supporting them all the way through university and building them up for their adult lives and careers ahead.

What concerns me deeply, however, is the fact that further research from the National Autistic Society showed that while 87% of teachers surveyed said that they felt confident or very confident supporting autistic pupils in the classroom, findings from a 2021 report showed that seven in 10 autistic children and young people said that school would be better if more teachers understood autism, while 54% of autistic students said that having teachers who did not understand them was the worst thing about school. That is a problem. There is a clear and sizeable gap between how teachers think it is going and how autistic children and children with a learning disability actually feel. It is vital that we bridge that gap. It is simply not fair on either party if we do not. All children deserve to have the very best possible experience in the classroom and the best opportunities to learn and fulfil their potential.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Lady is making excellent points to which I give my very strong support. Does she recognise the experience of many of my constituents, with young people waiting perhaps two years for an education, health and care plan and a diagnosis? Something that has become obvious to me only recently is that 50% of the young people on the books of child and adolescent mental health services in my part of Cumbria have autism and ADHD. It turns out that through the NHS, via the local integrated care board, there is literally zero funding for that service to support any of those young people, which delays their getting the care and support that they need in the classroom, but also affects all young people—some with neurological issues and some without—who need support for eating disorders, anxiety and so on. Is it not time that the NHS funded CAMHS sufficiently so that young people with neurological issues can get the treatment and diagnosis that they need?

Dame Caroline Dinéage: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. There will not be a single Member of Parliament who has not had some issues with local CAMHS, sadly. Of course, early intervention and recognition is key to this and can stave off many problems that come further down the line. I would not be doing teachers or pupils justice if I did not refer to wider issues surrounding SEND provision and support for autistic children more broadly. We know that there are simply not enough specialist SEND school places or trained professionals to cope with the increased need.

Schools are required under the Equality Act 2010 to make adjustments, but there is only so much they can do with current provision. As we have heard, it takes an inordinate amount of time to secure an EHCP and then for the associated funding to filter through to the educational establishment concerned. Meanwhile, schools are left to pick up the tab and in many cases to pick up the pieces involved in offering incredibly intensive support to children with very complex needs.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate, which is very fitting and certainly much needed in relation to our schools. Does she agree that this issue is not only important in primary and post-primary education but in nursery and playgroup settings, where it is absolutely vital, because ultimately children affected by these issues need support measures in place as soon as they reach primary school? Nursery and pre-school provision is where the core of this work needs to sit.

Dame Caroline Dinéage: The hon. Lady must be Mystic Meg. I say that because that issue is exactly what I will come on to next.

Early years settings are a crucial place to start this work; the hon. Lady has hit the nail on the head. Early diagnosis and putting in place the building blocks of support from the outset can have a lifelong impact on a child's attitude to education settings, and on their interaction and support from those settings; in fact, it can have a lifelong impact on their wellbeing.

If all education and care staff, particularly in early years settings, successfully underwent the right training, children who require extra support and assistance would be identified sooner, which would prevent some of the issues that we have heard about from developing. We heard from a teacher called Helen, who said that during her time in teacher training, which took four years, half a day was spent covering special educational needs. Such training leaves teachers ill-equipped to support a growing percentage of pupils in their classes.

I am sure that the Minister will tell me about the training that is provided. I expect that he will also tell me that the Government have published their strategy on special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision improvement—not that I am trying to interpret his speech for him—and about all the increased investment in SEND, which is over £10.5 billion by 2024-25, and the universal services programme, which will receive £12 million in funding, and that £1.4 million is available for the strategic priorities grant to support students at risk of discontinuing higher education studies. Those numbers have very little meaning to those caught in the cyclone of the system if they do not filter through to create meaningful improvements on the ground. I will therefore set out what I would like to know from the brilliant Minister.

What assessment has the Minister's Department made of the full picture of both learning disability training and autism training for education professionals? What level of understanding does he have about training—not only the quantity of training, but the quality of training? What conversations has he had with some of the excellent charities in this space and with the teachers, parents and children who actually live these things and therefore are experts by experience? To what level can he confidently tell me that all education professionals have the confidence

to teach neurodivergent children and children with learning disabilities, so that their needs are met and their potential is realised? To what extent is the experience of students and their carers taken into consideration?

Mr Vickers, you have already heard about what I am about to say next. During my time as Minister of State for care, in the Department of Health and Social Care, I started work on introducing the Oliver McGowan mandatory training for all health and social care staff. That became law in the Health and Care Act 2022, and it is now the Government's preferred and recommended training for health and social care staff.

The training is named after Oliver McGowan. Oliver was a remarkable young man whose tragic and completely avoidable death, at the age of just 17, shone a light on the need for health and social care staff to have better skills, better knowledge and better understanding of the needs of autistic people. It came about because of a meeting I had with Paula McGowan, Oliver's incredible mum, who courageously shared her family's unimaginable experiences with me and who has been a relentless advocate for the change that needed to happen. It is an honour to have Paula here today after she travelled all the way from Australia just to attend this debate.

Since November 2022, when the initial roll-out of the Oliver McGowan training began, over 1 million people have completed the first part. The training has received significant international interest in Canada, Australia and the Republic of Ireland, and as a result it has been made available on an e-learning platform. The initial feedback is incredibly exciting and shows a significant increase in participants' knowledge, confidence and skill, with 88% of participants saying that they felt confident they could communicate with people with a learning disability and with autistic people, and with 84% of participants saying they felt more confident in their work.

The most significant thing about the training is that it is co-delivered with trainers who are autistic or learning disabled, and they are paid for their time. They are experts by experience and are able to give health and care professionals first-hand insight into how to listen, how to act and how to get this right.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I thank her for highlighting the wonderful training that is being rolled out. I wanted to bring to the attention of the House, through my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, some work that we were doing with Caudwell Children and its national children's centre, and to highlight their hope that they can augment some of the work that is being undertaken in the UK to provide timely diagnosis and holistic assessment for children with autistic spectrum disorder. I put on record our thanks to Trudi Beswick for leading that wonderful centre and taking that work forward.

Dame Caroline Dinéage: First of all, I am very pleased to see my hon. Friend on this side of the House. She does a brilliant job as the chair of the APPG for disability, and I am very grateful to her for taking the time to make that commendation.

I will conclude very quickly. Following the success of the Oliver McGowan mandatory training, Paula has started a petition for all staff in educational settings to

have similar mandatory training on learning disabilities and autism. As I said, that training needs to start with professionals in early years settings and go all the way through to colleges and universities: teachers, lecturers and education staff must know how to adapt to their environment, how to listen to what young people are saying, how to understand, how to manage a sensory overload and crisis and how to adapt communication to meet individual needs. George, a teacher, said:

"Training is often focused on the symptoms rather than the sensory issues and the understanding behind it. Whilst dealing with symptomatic behaviour is important it can be difficult to understand some causes."

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): On the point about sensory overload, demands and anxiety, does my hon. Friend agree that, with the discrepancy between what kids see and what teachers feel they are doing, part of the challenge is in fully understanding what an autistic child or adult actually sees and has to deal with? Does she agree that that is quite difficult and that it requires significant time to fully understand the major challenges that lots of these kids go through and often succeed in pushing through, despite the challenges they face?

Dame Caroline Dinéage: That is an excellent point. It is worth pointing out that sometimes the behaviours that autistic children in particular can demonstrate can be very different. Autistic boys in the classroom behave very differently from autistic girls who might just sit at the back very quietly, mirroring others' behaviour, while struggling inside and not having the support that they need. That point is really important.

Finally, has the Minister's Department considered the brilliant Oliver McGowan model of mandatory training? What assessments has the Minister made for how that would benefit education professionals? By making the training mandatory, as it is for health and care staff, no teacher will miss out, which means that every child has an equal opportunity to gain support.

I ask the Minister to reflect on the stories that I have shared today and on those that we heard from other Members. While his Department is no doubt bolstering financial support, I ask him to consider the positive impact that mandatory training will have on the education of professionals and students. The success in health and care has been immediate and game changing, and I know that it has similar potential for children and young people's education.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I received prior notice that two Members wanted to speak in this debate. I will call the Front Benchers from 5.7 pm, if Members would bear that in mind.

4.48 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am very pleased to speak in this important debate with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinéage) on securing the debate and on the way in which she opened it.

I would like to pay tribute to Paula McGowan for her persistence in campaigning for this debate, for all her work to get the original debate that we held on this issue

[Barbara Keeley]

in 2018 and for all the campaigning work she has done since then. Paula has campaigned to secure around 70,000 signatures on the petition, so it is very good that we can discuss the Oliver McGowan mandatory training programme again. Her work has been instrumental in raising awareness of how we treat autistic people and people with learning disabilities in our health and care services. I pay tribute to her for that work.

In the debate which Paula helped to secure five years ago, I called for the Government to treat the introduction of mandatory training as an urgent priority. The Oliver McGowan mandatory training on learning disability and autism programme has now been delivered to around 750,000 healthcare staff—I think the hon. Lady said it was more than that, but that is the figure I have—and 200 people with a learning disability or autism have been trained to deliver parts of the programme. As we have heard, that is a very important part of it. Those are significant steps forward, but there is much more still to do.

Oliver's case illustrates the degree to which people with learning disabilities or autism do not get the healthcare treatment they should expect from a civilised, compassionate society. Oliver was a young man with a full life expectancy who had overcome many challenges to excel as a footballer, as an athlete and in his exams. He was let down repeatedly because clinicians simply did not understand the nature of his autism. With better awareness and care adjustments, his death could have been avoided.

The petition on mandatory training that we are discussing recognises the role of teachers and schools in offering support to children and young people with a learning disability or autism. The rolling out of training on learning disabilities and autism is likely to significantly benefit the raising of awareness of learning disabilities and autism in the education sector.

The Government's response to the petition states that headteachers should

“use their professional judgement to identify any further training”

for teachers. But the roll out of further training for education staff is clearly needed. Research by the National Autistic Society showed that 86% of secondary school teachers had received just half a day's training on autism, and that three in four parents or carers of autistic children feel that their child's school does not meet their needs.

One of my constituents—the parent of a boy aged nearly five who is showing traits of autism—told me about the struggle to get him support. She was told that he is “too naughty”, and he is limited to two hours of school a day. She said that her child

“is treated so differently, and he is more aware of it now. This makes him want to act out, as he thinks it's what is expected of him. He cries every day when he has to leave so many hours earlier than the other children. I think this is another reason he acts out, because every day he knows he will only get a couple of hours of play with everything. He is overstimulated, and his behaviour is a lot worse during that time. If he had time to settle down, and a proper routine at school, he would be calmer and his behaviour would be a lot better, as it is at home. I worry that if he doesn't receive the support he needs now, school may be a lot more difficult for him in the long run.”

Mandatory training on learning disabilities and autism for education staff could help to improve the situation for children and young people, as it undoubtedly has been doing for health and care staff since it was rolled out.

Julian Smith: One of the challenges for autistic kids seems to be that many people they interact with in the school system have not received the training that the hon. Lady has been talking about, and they are being treated in a behavioural context. Does she agree that we should persuade teachers, or people who interact with kids, that the reason why these children act in the way they do is nothing to do with behaviour?

Barbara Keeley: It is very much like the case I have just given: the parent of that five-year-old boy is told that he is “too naughty” to have more than two hours of school a day, and that is absolutely disgraceful. It is not a behavioural problem if it is autism.

Education, health and care plans are another important source of support. As we have heard, there are 200,000 school-age autistic pupils in England, but just 55% have an education, health and care plan. The Government's investment plan for children with special educational needs and disabilities claims that this is a priority area, but the National Autistic Society said there is “little substance” in the Government's plan for reducing waits for a child's education, health and care plan.

Concerningly, there have also been reports that the Government have signed a deal with a consultancy aiming to reduce targets for education, health and care plans by 20% for 55 local authorities, as part of a delivering better value in SEND programme. The consultancy firm was tasked with reducing cost pressures on local authorities by targeting a 20% reduction in the number of new education, health and care plans issued. It is painfully ironic that the design of this so-called value-for-money programme seems to have to cost the Government nearly £20 million in consultancy fees to Newton Europe. It is also painful to understand that the Government see education, health and care plans as cost pressures to be managed down, and not as vital documents that set out the education provision that children with significant needs must receive by law.

Tim Farron: I thank the hon. Lady for making such a valid point and for being so generous in giving way. It seems to me that even if we did not put an extra penny of funding into supporting young people with autism spectrum disorders—although we should—if we spent the money more intelligently and more fairly, we would do more good. We have a situation in which schools that do the right thing and accept young people with autism, and indeed other learning difficulties, are funded only once they get past the £7,000 threshold. Schools that do the right thing are having to spend out of their own coffers to support children, whereas schools that somehow dodge the bullet, so to speak, end up being financially rewarded. Is it not wiser that we spend money to support the schools that actually support the children?

Barbara Keeley: Indeed. Local authorities must be supported to fulfil their statutory duties to children and young people, just as schools and colleges, as a continuation, must access the training necessary to become genuinely inclusive. That is what we want to see.

As an MP, I raise many cases of parents and carers of children who have or are seeking a diagnosis of autism and are being failed by the schools they attend, yet it is such a fight to get an education, health and care plan for them. One of my constituents is the parent of a girl with complex special educational needs and disabilities who had to battle with the local authority to get an education, health and care plan for her daughter. My constituent told me about the battle she has had, saying that her daughter

“only has access to large mainstream secondary schools which is unacceptable for a child with such complex needs. I have provided all evidence, co-operated fully and repeated and repeated medical evidence and wrote lengthy information. They have all the information and now I am going to mediation and appeal. This process has taken over a year. I am exhausted. This is not good for anyone. I am not being heard and I am fighting to safeguard my daughter. I have a child with complex additional needs. My time, care and attention should be only focused on her but again I have to prepare now for mediation.”

I supported my constituent to get the plan for her daughter, but it took a long time and she ended up missing the first six months of secondary school.

It is crucial that we have better support for autistic pupils and pupils with learning disabilities. The Oliver McGowan mandatory training programme and education, health and care plans are both important elements in that respect. The Government must do more to ensure that autistic people and people with learning disabilities can receive the education they need, and that they are able to live long and independent lives in the community. Sadly, for far too many people that is a distant dream.

4.7 pm

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on leading this petitions debate. I put on the record my congratulations to the Minister, this being is my first opportunity to do so.

I thank the 171 members of the public from Darlington who signed the petition that led to today's debate. Every single week in my surgery, it is almost guaranteed that at least one family will come to see me with concerns related to neurodiverse conditions. It could be that they are awaiting an assessment or there are difficulties with the relationship with the school, or it could be that there are challenges with accessing medications. Each and every one of those families is trying to do the best for their children, and seemingly having to battle for the best for their children.

The day after I was elected, I was stopped in the street by three mothers in Darlington town centre. One of them asked me what I was going to do to help their families with autistic children. I must confess to having known very little about autism at that time, so I resolved to find out more and do all I could to support them. That learning continues, and only last week I was pleased to attend the understanding autism training for parliamentarians organised by the National Autistic Society.

I established the Darlington autism forum for parents of autistic children, and have organised multiple roundtable meetings with our local mental health trust and parents. I have visited Daisy Chain, a local charity that provides help and support to families who face these challenges,

as well as places such as the Mackenzie Thorpe Centre in Redcar, which is operated by the North East Autism Society, to see the amazing work that they do with children.

Julian Smith: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he is doing with families in his constituency. Does he agree that standing up for families who have autistic or neurodiverse kids—amazing kids they are supporting—can be really challenging? The parents are often judged by others on how they are handling very difficult situations, and they themselves need significant support.

Peter Gibson: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. We in this place are sent here to stand up for our constituents. In my view, there could be nobody more important than those families facing the battles of looking after an autistic child.

As a constituency MP, I have visited almost every school in Darlington; I have two left to go. My visits almost always involve a discussion about children with special educational needs and autism. It is clear that there are growing numbers in every single one of our schools, putting pressure on the staff, some of whom are not necessarily specialists in the conditions. I must single out Red Hall School in Darlington, which secured funding to expand and provide a social, emotional and mental health specialist centre called Strive. Red Hall and others are doing fantastic work in Darlington.

I was disappointed to learn through written parliamentary questions that the Department for Education holds no national records of the training that teachers undertake on the relevant conditions. I welcome the Government's recent announcement of additional funding, particularly for the new 40-place school in Darlington, which will deliver special educational needs places. However, my primary concern is for the pupils who are already in our mainstream schools and the support that they need.

The assessment backlog is frankly a scandal, with families sometimes having to wait up to three years to be seen. I acknowledge that there is a range of help and support available while they are awaiting assessment, but getting children into the right school place, with the necessary specialists, is part of the solution. Staff need to be properly trained. The key has to be clearing the backlog of assessments. Today's important debate provides an opportunity to put on the record my support for improved and expanded training on neurodiverse conditions for our hard-working teachers. I look forward to the Minister's response.

5.1 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on securing this important debate.

I have a personal interest in this subject. Many years ago, as a reasonably experienced further education lecturer, I was faced with a young man who was severely autistic, and I did not know what to do. Things have changed a bit since those days. Like the hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson), I have undertaken autism training. It is important that we get an awareness of autism into the general public as well as schools. It was difficult to listen to some of the stories told by the hon. Member for

[Marion Fellows]

Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), because we all know that it happens, although none of us want it to happen anywhere.

In their recent programme for government, the Scottish Government have outlined their commitment to work with teachers to provide additional professional learning opportunities while seeking to build on the additional support for learning plan. I was a member of the Education Committee when I first came here, and I often think that it is easier to make big changes in a small country such as Scotland, with one main type of school—local authority schools—than it is to make them in England, which has many varieties of schools and a number of local authorities involved.

The Scottish Government are proud—as am I—of their investment in education. It is important that every pupil gets the best education possible for them. That is why in Scotland there is a national neurodevelopment specification for children and young people. It is based on the Scottish Government’s “Getting it right for every child”—GIRFEC—approach, which I have talked about in this place before. It is important that the same kind of education is given across the piece. The neurodevelopment specification makes it clear that support should be in place to meet the child or young person’s requirements when they need it, rather than depending on a formal diagnosis. That is particularly important. Parents often know what is best for their child, no matter which part of the United Kingdom they live in.

The Scottish Government’s additional support for learning legislation clearly places education authorities under duties to identify, provide for and review the support needs of their pupils. In 2021, the Scottish Government published the Autism in Schools action plan, and the majority of its actions are complete. Several of the actions, such as the funding of professional learning resources like the autism toolbox, are intended to be ongoing, to reflect best practice and current research in the area. The Scottish Government have outlined their commitment to work with teachers to provide additional professional learning opportunities while seeking to build on the additional support plan for learning.

It is really important that autistic pupils and those with other learning difficulties are treated equitably with others in their class. It is also important that not just teachers are involved in training when it comes to autism. In Scotland, a pupil support staff working group listens to pupil support workers in schools, who are often the staff who deal the most with autistic children. It is important that they have the training as well.

Julian Smith: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is about not just teaching support but dinner and food providers, janitors and other staff? Everybody who interacts with a child at a school should be able to deal with whatever part of the spectrum the child is on.

Marion Fellows: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Raising autism awareness is so important across the spectrum, but especially in a school, where there should be a nurturing and welcoming environment for all pupils. The teaching standards in Scotland are set by the General Teaching Council, which requires teachers to be able to identify and respond appropriately to pupils with difficulties in or barriers to learning. In 2021,

professional standards included a specific recognition of additional support needs, which is really important. Teachers cannot now be registered without that.

I referred earlier to my experience, which was really difficult, because I was presented with a young autistic man who was accompanied by a care worker, and I had no idea what to do. Things have changed in the intervening years. One thing worth mentioning is that the other students in my class really benefited after a year of this young man being with them. They became much more aware and supportive of him. It is important that all autistic children are allowed in the mainstream, where appropriate. Mainstream pupils and students learn as much as the autistic person.

Julian Smith: On the point of different children in mainstream education and how to deal with autistic children, along with the challenges that many autistic children face, they also have a huge opportunity, through the many aspects of neurodiversity that provide them with the ability to excel. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is critical to stress the positives as well as the challenges they face?

Marion Fellows: Yes. I find it strange to be so much in agreement with a Member from the Government side, but in this instance I am absolutely in agreement. I was in a school on Friday talking to fifth and sixth-year pupils. At the very end, a young lady came up and said, “I am autistic and want to know what you are going to do about this. Do you know about this particular society?” I had never heard of it, but I took that on board. I felt real pride and pleasure in the fact that she was able to use her autism as a way to approach her MP and was very proud of the fact that she was autistic. She knew more about the subject than I did—[*Interruption.*] Mr Vickers, I acknowledge your hand signal; I am going to wind up my speech.

It is really important that money is spent in schools to good effect, which is why I am proud that Scotland spends more per pupil than anywhere else in the UK. The Government need to look at training for teachers in England—that is what this debate is about—and support workers. Perhaps they should look at what they can learn from the Scottish example.

5.10 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) on securing this important debate, and I thank everybody who has signed petitions to push this issue forward.

I welcome Paula McGowan to Parliament today, and I thank her for all the work she has done in the name of her son, Oliver, to campaign for better training for staff in the NHS and social care who work with autistic people and people with learning disabilities. Oliver’s Campaign has made so much progress, and the way Paula has turned her unimaginable pain into action on behalf of other families is inspirational.

I thank all Members who have spoken in this very consensual debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) drew on her great experience and her long commitment to improving the lives of autistic people and people with learning disabilities. She highlighted clearly some of the concerns

about current Government policy, expressed in the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan—in particular, the explicit objective of reducing the number of EHCPs.

The hon. Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) spoke about the important work he is doing to support his constituents. He also spoke about the backlog of assessments, which is an issue in many parts of the country, and the lack of support for such children in mainstream schools.

The need for better training for education staff working with children and young people who are autistic or have a learning disability is clear. The presentation of children with autism doubled between 2015-16 and 2022-23, and the number of children with an education, health and care plan more than doubled for autistic children and was up by more than a third for other SEND diagnoses in the same period.

When my oldest daughter was in primary school, she had a friend I will call Paul. Paul was autistic and high functioning: he could do really well at school if his social and emotional needs were properly met. What I witnessed over the seven years of Paul's primary school journey was the extremely high extent to which his whole experience at school was determined by his teacher's understanding of his social and emotional needs. In a school year when the teacher understood that Paul would become extremely anxious if there was a change in routine or if things had not been properly explained to him and took steps to avoid that happening, Paul flourished at school. But in a school year when the teacher did not understand Paul's needs as an autistic person and treated him simply as a badly behaved child, his mum could be called to the school multiple times in the same week to collect him early. He became more and more anxious about going to school, and the whole year became a disaster.

Many schools and colleges work really hard to ensure their staff are well equipped to work with children and young people who are autistic or have a learning disability, and there is a lot of really good practice. I pay tribute to the incredibly dedicated workforce that provides specialist support to children and young people with autism and learning disabilities, and helps to make school a place where they feel safe and understood. In the absence of leadership and resources from the Government, parents all too often face a postcode lottery.

Paul's story is being repeated in education settings across the country, and that is borne out in the persistent absence figures. Persistent absence from school is shockingly high across the board at present—22.5% of children missed 10% or more days of school in 2021-22—but it is significantly higher for autistic children, at 32%, and even higher for children with a SEND statement or EHCP, at 36.9%. That is a shocking and completely unacceptable situation. Day to day, it means that thousands of pupils are not having their needs met by mainstream schools, but that is little wonder given that the teacher training and continuous professional development curriculum has not developed to keep pace with the rising presentation of autism and SEND needs. We are simply not equipping teachers to meet the needs of every child in their classrooms. Although some teacher training courses offer the opportunity for students to develop further skills for working with pupils with SEND and autism, this is not consistent, and it is entirely possible to qualify as a teacher and start work

in a school with only the most cursory knowledge, which is not supplemented or reinforced by further training or CPD.

Schools across the country are struggling to recruit special educational needs co-ordinators and SEND teachers, and there is a national shortage of educational psychologists working in the state sector. We cannot debate the need for autism and learning disability training for education staff without mentioning the wider context of the system of SEND support, which is almost completely broken. Parents across the country have to battle for the support their children need, and the resourcing pressures on local authorities are causing councils to refuse to fund EHCPs and forcing parents to go to tribunal, where 96% of them win.

The neglect of the SEND system over the past 13 years has been a shocking failure of successive Conservative-led Governments. A Labour Government would act to address the problems. Equipping education staff to understand and meet the needs of autistic children and children with learning disabilities is an essential step towards building an inclusive mainstream.

Peter Gibson: I am interested in hearing what the Labour party would do were it in government. Could the hon. Lady outline what it would do differently to tackle the challenges of recruitment that the sector faces?

Helen Hayes: I am just about to move on to exactly that. We would ensure that more children can have their needs met and be part of a school community close to where they live. Labour would use the funding from ending the tax breaks currently enjoyed by private schools to recruit 6,500 new teachers, including SEND specialists, thereby alleviating the current pressures on teaching staff and ensuring that teachers have time for the pupils in their classrooms. We would introduce a teacher training entitlement—an annual entitlement to CPD that could be used to increase expertise in autism and SEND. We would ensure that there is mental health support in every school across the country, and we would change the wider context in which schools are setting their priorities by reforming the Ofsted inspection framework to make inclusion part of our vision for what it means to be a good school. Inclusion would be part of the report card for schools, which, under Labour, would replace the single-word Ofsted judgment.

Peter Gibson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Hayes: I will not. I need to finish so that the Minister can come in and there is time for the hon. Member for Gosport to wind up afterwards.

We want to see an increased focus on SEND within initial teacher training and the early career framework, and we will work with leading academic institutions, Teach First and others to ensure that all trainee teachers are routinely equipped to work with children with autism and special educational needs and disabilities. Establishing an inclusive mainstream where as many children as possible can thrive is the first step in reforming the system of SEND support, which has become broken and adversarial on the Government's watch. A Labour Government will deliver the support that is so urgently needed.

[Helen Hayes]

The hon. Member for Darlington mentioned the recruitment and retention crisis. We recruit and retain staff in any part of the public sector when we work from the centre of Government to make their working environment tolerable and to relieve the day-to-day pressures they are under. The measures I have outlined today—there is more to talk about—will start the work of repairing this part of our public services, which is so important and so vital for some of the most vulnerable children, but also for some of the most special and talented children across our country.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenege) for securing a debate on such an important subject. She has played an instrumental role in mandating learning disability and autism training across the health and care sector, and in rolling out the Oliver McGowan mandatory training. I know that my colleague the Secretary of State for Education, who championed that as a Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care, is an equally strong advocate for the training.

I thank Oliver's family for their tireless dedication to this issue. They went through what no family should have to go through, and I share their passion for ensuring that dedicated and hardworking professionals have the knowledge, skills and expertise to provide the right support and try to ensure that no family experiences the same. I hope I might get the opportunity to meet Paula in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport predicted some—not all—of my answers to her questions on the picture of learning disability and autism training for education professionals. Teachers in schools focus on SEND at each stage of their training. To be recommended by an accredited provider for qualified teacher status, trainees must demonstrate that they meet the teacher standards at the appropriate level. Both the initial teacher training core content framework and the early career framework outline what trainee and new teachers should learn, including content on adaptive teaching for students with special educational needs.

The universal services programme, which my hon. Friend touched on, provides SEND-specific training for the school and college workforce. So far, 6,600 school and college staff have accessed free online training modules, and 81 schools and 135 colleges have identified and led their own SEND-focused school improvement projects. Since the programme was launched in 2022, over 100,000 education professionals have undertaken autism awareness training through the Autism Education Trust's "train the trainer" model. My hon. Friend may not know this, but the largest take-up of the programme's range of online units has been within her own local authority of Hampshire. I assume that is in part due to her advocacy on this issue.

Our SEND and alternative provision practitioner standards, which will focus on supporting frontline practitioners in mainstream settings, will include a practitioner standard on autism. We will publish the

first three practitioner standards by the end of 2025. Regarding the Department's understanding of not only the quantity of training, but the quality, in the summer Ofsted carried out full inspections on all six lead providers of the early career framework that I referred to. All got a positive Ofsted judgment, with four of the six being awarded an "outstanding" judgment. Surveys from the universal services programme have consistently highlighted the positive impact of it, with 2,300 participants surveyed three to six months later finding that 98% had an improved confidence in identifying and meeting needs. Perhaps even more importantly, 93% had reported making changes to their practice as a result of accessing the activities.

I was asked about conversations I have personally had with teachers, parents and some of the excellent charities in this area. I have had a wide range of conversations as a constituency MP, because I visit a school in my own area pretty much every week. The issue of parents in Oxfordshire not getting the support they should for their children with special educational needs has been one of the top two issues I have been written to about in the last 18 months, so I had lots of conversations with parents, teachers and charities before I got to this role. In this role, I have made a number of visits around the country and had lots of meetings with different charities on this issue. The voice of parents has been incredibly important in elevating the status of this issue, more so even than the voice of schools or Government or local authorities. It is parents who very articulately describe what feels like a war of attrition to try to get the support they need for their children. It is a war that any parent would wage but no parent should have to.

On the confidence of professionals to teach neurodivergent children and children with learning disabilities so that their needs are met, our school and college panel survey indicated that just over half of schools agreed that they were able to effectively support pupils with special educational needs. The February 2023 parent, pupil and learner survey found that about 60% of all parents were confident in the school being able to meet their child's needs.

My hon. Friend touched on the fact that the National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism reported that 87% of teachers surveyed felt confident supporting autistic children in the classroom. That is a very high figure, but I accept that, as she said, teachers' confidence may not always reflect the experiences of children and their families. We are exploring opportunities to build teacher expertise by reviewing the initial teacher training framework and the early career framework, which we will conclude by the end of this year. In early 2024, we intend to publish what more we will do to support trainees and early career teachers to be more confident and have the most up-to-date evidence that should inform their practice.

SENCOs play a vital role in setting the direction of their schools and co-ordinating the support required by children with special educational needs. We want to invest in their training. That is why we have developed the new national professional qualification for SENCOs, which will come into force in autumn next year. We hope that will play a key role in improving outcomes for children with special educational needs in schools. We have also committed to funding 7,000 early years staff to gain an accredited level 3 SENCO qualification

because, as we all know, the earlier we can identify need the better. That programme for the early years workforce has been hugely popular with the sector.

Turning to the point made by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), we are not targeting a 20% reduction in EHCPs or the growth of EHCPs. We have no target of that nature whatever. We want children to get the support they need at an early enough stage and without them needing an EHCP to get that support. I refer the hon. Lady to my letter to the Education Committee for further clarification.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

David Johnston: I am not sure I have time because I need to stop at 5.28 pm, but I am happy to write to her.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) on all his work, which includes setting up a forum for the families of those with autism. That is typical of his work as a local champion. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), he brought the voice of families to this debate, which is the most important voice when we are discussing these issues.

More broadly, the Department for Education has worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to develop a refreshed cross-Government autism strategy, which was published in 2021 and backed by more than £74 million. This year the Department of Health and Social Care has allocated £4.2 million to improve services for autistic children and young people, including assessment services through the autism in schools programme.

There is a lot happening as part of the £2.6 billion special educational needs and AP reform programme. Of course there is more to do. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport for bringing us this debate and all of those professionals and parents who are working so hard to support children with these conditions. I look

forward to working with Members present on how we can ensure that these children get the support they need at an early enough stage.

5.28 pm

Dame Caroline Dinage: It is very kind of you to call me to say a few words at the end, Mr Vickers. I am grateful to the Minister for his response. It is clear that he cares passionately about this. He set out a few details that will go some way to offering an element of reassurance.

This debate was not about knocking the Government or scoring any cheap party political points, and it certainly was not about undermining our education professionals. I know the Minister cares deeply about this and that education staff up and down the country care passionately about getting this right, but they need the right support, tools and knowledge to do that.

We do not need to reinvent the wheel to provide that. The Oliver McGowan training is already there and making a difference. It trains all health and care staff. We heard earlier of the importance of ensuring that it is not just those who are high up the academic food chain who receive the training. In health and care, it is based on how likely someone is to interact with patients, not their seniority. That is the same with children and young people. I draw the Minister's attention to that disparity between how teachers think it is going and how children and their parents think it is going.

There is so much at stake for our young people: their education, wellbeing and futures. The Oliver McGowan training was one of the most important things I was involved in when I was a Minister. I encourage the Minister to meet Paula to talk about this further because it is an outstanding model.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered autism and learning disability training for education staff.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 21 November 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Republic of Korea Trade Negotiations: Launch

The Minister of State, Department for Business and Trade (Greg Hands): Today the Department for Business and Trade will launch negotiations for an upgraded free trade agreement (FTA) with the Republic of Korea (RoK), with the first round of negotiations to be held in Seoul in January.

In line with the Government's commitments to transparency and scrutiny, more information on these negotiations will be published and placed in the Libraries of both Houses. This will include:

The strategic case for an upgraded UK-RoK trade agreement.

Our objectives for the negotiations.

A scoping assessment, providing a preliminary economic assessment of the potential impact of the agreement.

A summary of the responses to the call for input on trade with the RoK, held between December 2022 and February 2023. This took views from consumers, businesses, and other interested stakeholders across the UK on their priorities for upgrading our existing trading relationship with the RoK.

The RoK is an important trading partner in the Indo-Pacific region. Our trade relationship with the RoK has grown substantially since 2011, from £7.4 billion to £18.3 billion in 2022. The RoK is now the 13th largest economy in the world and the UK's 21st largest trading partner. The RoK's import market is expected to grow by 45% by 2035, to and have around 45 million middle-class consumers. This projected growth has the potential to drive further demand for world-class UK goods and services. This, therefore, is an opportune moment to ensure our trade agreement with the RoK is best tailored to the needs of the UK and delivering for our economy.

Our existing agreement came into effect in 2021 and enabled trade continuity between the UK and the RoK following the UK's withdrawal from the EU. It replicates the provisions outlined in the 2011 EU-RoK FTA. Our current agreement is one of the deepest FTAs that the RoK has signed to date and provides a strong platform for UK companies to access the RoK market. As part of securing and future proofing our trading relationship with the RoK, there are opportunities to maximise the number of UK businesses benefiting from this platform.

These negotiations provide an opportunity to secure simpler rules of origin which reflect UK industry requirements. Rules that consider existing and future supply chains, and are supported by predictable administrative arrangements, will help support the number of UK businesses accessing preferential tariffs.

In 2021, around 6,700 UK businesses exported goods to the RoK, of which 85% were small and medium enterprises (SMEs). An updated FTA could also further support SME trade with the RoK by streamlining existing

complex arrangements, simplifying and digitalising customs procedures, and ensuring SMEs can access the wider benefits of a new FTA.

Since the current UK-RoK FTA was negotiated, trade policy has advanced in several areas. Perhaps most importantly, the existing agreement lacks comprehensive digital provisions. Both the UK and the RoK have previously negotiated world-class digital trade commitments with other trading partners, and this is an area of great potential for negotiations. Digital trade is rapidly becoming dominant, with 79% of our services trade with the RoK now delivered digitally. As a global services superpower, seizing opportunities in this area is a key part of further enhancing the UK's prosperity.

Enhancing the UK-RoK FTA can also support the broader UK-RoK relationship and ensure it continues to thrive in the future, building on the 140 years of diplomatic relations we have enjoyed. Through these negotiations, we can take further steps to bolster our ongoing co-operation in areas such as energy and supply chains to anticipate and mitigate against future economic shocks.

In all of our trade negotiations, we will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food safety standards. Protecting the NHS is a fundamental principle of our trade policy; the NHS, the price it pays for medicines and its services are not on the table.

The Government will continue to keep Parliament updated as negotiations progress, including close engagement with the relevant parliamentary Committees.

[HCWS56]

TREASURY

Investment Support

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): The Chancellor is announcing new measures to drive innovation and help pension funds and other investors to invest in high-growth businesses.

This includes new vehicles tailored to the needs of pension funds to help them invest the capital unlocked through the Mansion House compact. The Government will provide £250 million to support successful bidders under the long-term investment for technology and science (LIFTS) initiative, subject to contract, and is confirming plans to launch a new growth fund within the British Business Bank to give pension funds access to investment opportunities in the UK's most promising businesses,

In addition, the Chancellor is announcing new measures to support innovative businesses to access the finance they need to start and scale up. These include:

At least £50 million of additional funding for the British Business Bank's successful 'Future Fund: Breakthrough' programme—that will provide direct investment to support the UK's promising pipeline of R&D-intensive firms;

A venture capital fellowship scheme to support the next generation of world-leading investors in our renowned VC funds, similar to the successful US Kauffman fellowship; and

A £20 million investment to foster more spin-out companies that are created using research done in universities.

Spin-outs are start-up companies that are created based on intellectual property (IP) generated through a university's research. The Government are announcing the publication of the independent review of spin-outs.^[1] The review has been led by two leaders in the field of academia and venture capital—Irene Tracey, vice-chancellor of Oxford University, and Andrew Williamson, managing partner of Cambridge Innovation Capital—and makes a series of recommendations to improve the performance of UK universities at spinning out companies.

The recommendations include best practice licensing deal terms—10-25% university equity for life sciences spin-outs, as per recently published guidance, and 10% or less for less IP-intensive sectors. The Chancellor is accepting all the recommendations and announcing £20 million for a new cross-disciplinary proof-of-concept research fund. This will help prospective founders in our universities demonstrate the commercial potential of their research. The full Government response will be published as part of the autumn statement.

^[1] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-university-spin-out-companies>.

[HCWS58]

Low Pay Commission Recommendations

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Laura Trott): Today I can inform the House that the Government will accept all of the independent Low Pay Commission's recommendations for the new national living wage and national minimum wage rates, which will come into force in April 2024.

In April the Government published their remit to the Low Pay Commission for 2023, asking them to make recommendations for the national living wage in line with the Government's ambitious target and manifesto commitment to reach two-thirds of median earnings by 2024 and the age threshold lowered to 21 years, provided that economic conditions allow.

The Low Pay Commission has recommended that:

The national living wage should increase by 9.8%, from £10.42 to £11.44 an hour, with the age threshold lowered from 23 to 21 years old;

The rate for 18 to 20-year-olds should increase by 14.8%, from £7.49 to £8.60 an hour; and

The rate for 16 to 17-year-olds and the apprentice rate should both increase by 21.2%, from £5.28 to £6.40 an hour.

The Low Pay Commission has also recommended that the accommodation offset increases from the current rate of £9.10 to £9.99 from 1 April 2024.

By accepting the Low Pay Commission's recommendations, the Government will meet their target, ending low hourly pay for eligible workers.

The new national living wage rate of £11.44 will be a record increase and represents an increase of over £1,800 to the annual earnings of a full-time worker on the national living wage. The increases to both national living wage and national minimum wage rates are expected to benefit nearly three million workers.

These increases are due to come into effect from 1 April 2024, subject to parliamentary approval. The Government intend to lay implementing regulations before Parliament in due course.

[HCWS59]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Federated Data Platform: Contract Award

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): Today, NHS England announced that, following an open and competitive procurement, it has awarded a group led by Palantir Technologies UK, with support from Accenture, PwC, NECS and Carnall Farrar, the contract to provide the new NHS Federated Data Platform (FDP).

The NHS manages data in different systems that do not connect effectively or efficiently. Every day, clinicians and other hospital staff spend time on the phone and in meetings, trying to join this information up themselves—to manage their theatre lists, waiting lists and information on patients ready to be discharged. This time could be better spent caring for patients.

The FDP is software that will sit across NHS trusts and integrated care systems (ICSs), allowing them to connect data they already hold, such as health records, waiting lists, and theatre and staff rosters, in a safe and secure environment, to better manage patient care. The FDP will support key priorities of the NHS, including recovery of elective care and the improvement of discharge processes to get medically fit patients treated and home quicker.

The safety and security of patient data is front and centre of this new system. As happens currently, there will be clear rules and auditability covering who can access this data, what they can see, and what they can do. Only authorised users will be granted access to data for approved purposes—for example, NHS staff and those supporting them, such as administrators, bed managers or care co-ordinators, and staff in social care supporting the move from hospital care. The provider of the software will not hold or have access to NHS data for any purpose, other than as directed by the NHS; they will not control the data in the platform, nor will they be permitted to access, use or share it for their own purposes. The contract makes strict stipulations about confidentiality. No new data will be collected, and GP data will not be part of the national platform.

In addition, NHS England has awarded a contract to a separate provider, IQVIA, for privacy enhancing technology, as an additional safeguard to enhance the security of data used in the FDP. The FDP will not go live at trusts or ICSs until this privacy enhancing technology is in place.

Across England, 26 trusts have been piloting what the FDP will provide. Clinicians have described the results as “game-changing”. It has helped them to better organise their clinics and waiting lists by integrating and consolidating data from different hospital systems or by creating a single list of information used by everyone working in health and care on discharge of patients from hospital. Patients in these vanguard trusts have seen falls in waiting times, discharge delays reduce, and diagnoses speed up. Theatre utilisation has increased by more than 6%, meaning an average of 120 additional patients per month are being treated at each trust. A new discharge tool has allowed one trust to reduce unnecessary days in hospital for long-stayers by 36% and halve the number of patients occupying a hospital bed for 21 days or more, compared with the England average.

It is these real benefits that an FDP will bring for patients and clinicians that have seen the chief executives of all 42 integrated care boards sign up to an open statement of support for the procurement.

Every hospital and integrated care board will have its own version of the platform which can connect and collaborate with other data platforms as a “federation”. In the first contract year, investment is expected to be at least £25.6 million and over the total contractual period of seven years, there will be up to £330 million investment in the Federated Data Platform and associated services. Learning about how to make the roll-out to trusts as efficient as possible will be built in overtime to reduce costs.

Additional funding has been set aside for other organisations to bid in separate, future procurements to build new products on to the platform that are interoperable and provide the opportunity for the NHS to benefit from new innovations from a range of suppliers. This makes it easier for health and care organisations to work together, compare data, analyse it at different geographic, demographic and organisational levels, and share and spread new effective digital solutions.

The contract will not only benefit users of the NHS; it will see investment in the UK-based data industry: the contract includes the creation by the supplier of a hub in the north-west. Data will not leave the UK.

Contract award for the FDP is the first stage of the process. An advisory group made up of expert health and care stakeholders, as well as patients and regional system representatives, will help to shape how the FDP is implemented. NHS England has already carried out engagement on the FDP requirements, including with patient and professional representative bodies. Ongoing public engagement is planned throughout the period of the contract, including as part of a recently announced circa £2 million national programme of engagement on the use of health data.

Further information on the FDP can be found on NHS England’s webpages at:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/digitaltechnology/digitising-connecting-and-transforming-health-and-care/fdp-faqs>.

[HCWS57]

JUSTICE

Correction to Question 203779 in 2022-23 Session

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mike Freer): In the 2022-2023 parliamentary session, the Ministry of Justice responded to a PQ (203779) in relation to the amount of non-cash vouchers awarded to staff as performance related bonuses in the financial

years 2022-23 and 2021-22, identified in the Department’s workforce management information as members of the Core Ministers Department. For reference, as previously noted in the original answer, the Core Ministerial Department had a total of 7,613 employees as of June 2023.

The figure provided for the financial year 2022-23, was inaccurate and an error. This figure was incorrectly calculated, when collating numerous data sources and interrogating them utilising complex Excel formula functions.

We previously stated:

For the Financial Year 2022-23, a total of £425,551 was made to the Core Ministerial Department staff.

However, upon recalculation, the accurate figure can be found below:

For the Financial Year 2022-23, a total of £684,976 was made to the Core Ministerial Department staff.

This does not change the total figure provided for the entire Department which remains correct.

I am apologising for this error and clarifying the position in relation to performance related bonuses, provided as non-cash vouchers. For reference, the Department takes its responsibility for parliamentary accountability very seriously and has reviewed and amended the process for checking responses to parliamentary questions to ensure future accuracy.

[HCWS54]

TRANSPORT

Motoring Executive Agency Business Plans: 2023-24

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I am pleased to announce the publication of the 2023-24 business plans for the Department for Transport’s Motoring Agencies: the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA), the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA), and the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA).

Each agency’s business plan sets out:

The key business priorities that each agency will deliver and any significant changes they plan to make to their services, and

the key performance indicators, by which their performance will be assessed.

These plans allow service users and members of the public to understand the agencies’ plans for delivering their key services, progressing their transformation programmes, and managing their finances.

The business plans will be available electronically on www.gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS55]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 21 November 2023

EDUCATION

Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity

The following are extracts from the Debate on the Address, on the subject of Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity, on 8 November 2023.

Gillian Keegan: Earlier this year, we announced the largest ever investment in childcare in England's history. Very soon, we will be spending £8 billion a year. That investment will ensure that every child gets the best start in life. It means that working parents will be entitled to 30 hours of free childcare from the end of parental leave until their child starts school. To give parents the flexibility they need, we are rolling out universal wraparound childcare for primary school children from 8 am to 6 pm. These Conservative policies will end the choice that some working mums and dads feel they need to make between having a family and having a career, and it will save parents up to £6,500 a year.

[Official Report, 8 November 2023, Vol. 740, c. 170.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan):

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

Gillian Keegan: To give parents the flexibility they need, we are rolling out **wraparound childcare for parents of primary school children** from 8 am to 6 pm.

Gillian Keegan: I notice that the Labour party had a lot to say about attendance this morning, but the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) may have missed the 380,000 fewer children persistently absent in the past year. Yet again, Labour offers little more than empty words, with a touch of student politics. In Labour-run Wales, attendance rates are still far behind those in England. Last year's attendance data showed that Wales only managed an attendance rate of 85.5%, compared with England's 92.5%.

[Official Report, 8 November 2023, Vol. 740, c. 171.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan):

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct response should have been:

Gillian Keegan: In Labour-run Wales, attendance rates are still far behind those in England. Last year's attendance data showed that Wales only managed an attendance rate of **88.5%**, compared with England's 92.5%.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Tuesday 21 November 2023

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Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunity	3MC

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