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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 27 November 2023

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

The Clerk at the Table having informed the House of the unavoidable absence of the Speaker from this day's sitting, the Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Organised Crime

1. **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to help reduce levels of organised crime. [900281]

11. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): What steps he is taking to help reduce levels of organised crime. [900291]

15. **Antony Higginbotham** (Burnley) (Con): What steps he is taking to help reduce levels of organised crime. [900295]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): We will continue to break the business model of organised crime gangs to keep the people of this country safe. We are disrupting their activities both domestically in the UK and internationally, including disrupting the work of the gangs behind the illegal small-boat crossings, and it is why the Criminal Justice Bill creates new powers to target organised criminal gangs. We will also publish a new serious and organised crime strategy soon.

Simon Jupp: Criminal gangs do not care about the people they are smuggling into our country and they must be stopped. We must stop the boats in ways that are consistent with our international obligations and end the dangerous journeys that risk human life. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must focus on breaking the business model of these criminal gangs?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The people who are being smuggled are seen as just products; they are expendable in the eyes of the people smugglers, and we must and will do everything we can to break their business model. I commend the work of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration, who has recently been to Bulgaria, where in close co-operation with our international partners there we have seized boats and engines. We are breaking the business model, and we will continue to drive down those illegal small-boat crossings until we have stopped the boats.

Greg Smith: Serious organised acquisitive crime is hitting rural communities hard, with high-value agricultural equipment targeted for theft. The National Rural crime unit has recently recovered over £5 million of stolen equipment, nearly £1 million of which was recovered abroad. The Construction Plant-hire Association, NFU Mutual and the Construction Equipment Association have put significant funds into the NRCU but what more can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that it has the resources it needs to tackle these serious organised criminal gangs?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he has done in this area, including with his private Members' Bill. He is absolutely right that the rural communities of this country need to be supported, and they will be. Driving down rural crime is an important area of work and we have provided £200,000 of funding to help set up the NRCU. My hon. Friend and I, and others in this House, understand the terrible impact this has, and we will continue to work with the rural police forces to drive down rural crime.

Antony Higginbotham: In Burnley and right across Lancashire county lines continues to be a problem, with organised groups peddling drugs and exploiting young people with no regard for the harm they are doing, not just to the communities but to the young people they are exploiting. Lancashire police are making very good inroads with an enhanced rural policing unit and neighbourhood taskforces, but what more can Lancashire Constabulary do to tackle the county lines issue and bring order back to our streets?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this vile type of criminality, which targets the young and the most vulnerable. As part of our fight against county lines we are investing up to £145 million in our county lines programme, and since it was launched in 2019 police activity has resulted in over 4,700 county lines being closed, over 14,800 arrests and over 7,200 safeguard referrals. We will keep our focus on this evil criminality.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Given that, shockingly, the average time it takes for a crime to be charged has trebled since 2016, will the Secretary of State embrace the Police Federation's "Simplify DG6" campaign and scrap the redaction rules his Government introduced in 2020, in order to cut bureaucracy, get cases to the Crown Prosecution Service quicker, and free up officers' time to be out fighting crime?

James Cleverly: We are actively working with the CPS to simplify and speed up this process. I will of course look at the proposals put forward, because we want police officers out in their communities on the beat and tackling crime, rather than doing paperwork—important though that is.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The police report a 25% increase in shoplifting in recent months. There is much evidence, as the Home Secretary will be aware, that organised criminal gangs go into shops to try to steal as much as they can and target shop workers. As we approach Christmas, what assurance can the Home Secretary provide to shop workers—not just at Christmas, but across the year—that he will start dealing with these gangs and start realising that all retail crime is a problem in this country that needs tackling?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight this issue. It is one that we take seriously through Operation Pegasus. We are working through the leadership of the police and crime commissioner for Sussex on this very issue. No doubt either the Policing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) or I will have the opportunity to update the House on this work as it progresses.

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

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): This autumn, the Government pledged to treat retail crime as organised crime, but with their Criminal Justice Bill, they have fallen at the first hurdle. There is no consolidated offence to protect retail workers, no strong signal on the £200 limit on investigations and a denial of reality on their hollowing out of neighbourhood policing. From the answers we have heard, the Home Secretary wants us to believe that we have never had it so good, but the ones who are thriving are organised criminals. Will the Government accept our amendments to add the protection of shop workers into the legislation?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman will know that attacking shop workers is already a statutory aggravating factor. We will look at what more we can do to protect shop workers. The retail action plan is in place, including the use of CCTV and facial recognition software. We will continue to explore all avenues to protect shopworkers, because they, like everyone else, deserve our protection.

Illegal Migration: Small Boats

2. **Jill Mortimer** (Hartlepool) (Con): What progress he has made on stopping small boats transporting migrants across the English channel. [900282]

10. **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What progress he has made on stopping small boats transporting migrants across the English channel. [900290]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): So far this year, we have reduced the number of these dangerous, illegal and completely unnecessary crossings by more than a third compared with last year, despite increases of nearly a third in Europe. Nevertheless, the number of illegal arrivals remains unacceptably high. We remain focused on delivering our comprehensive plan to stop the boats by breaking the business model of the people smugglers, and we will shortly be piloting emergency legislation through this House to ensure that flights to Rwanda take off as a matter of urgency.

Jill Mortimer: Figures on Thursday revealed that immigration to the UK is skyrocketing. Is it not time to realise that those well-intentioned international treaties and conventions agreed 70 years ago are no longer fit for purpose? We simply cannot accommodate all those who would qualify for asylum under existing rules. The world is facing troubled times and more mass migration. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will do all he can to raise the bar for those migrating or seeking asylum here and look at other solutions to stop people leaving their homelands, so that those countries can

make better futures for themselves without the loss of so many of their young? Much of Europe is in a dire state because of mass immigration. We cannot let the United Kingdom go the same way.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes a strong point. While some of those coming here to claim asylum have genuine grounds for asylum, many are economic migrants making spurious claims to game the system. For some nationalities, our grant rates are out of sync with European countries, and that is why we have undertaken extensive work to lower them. For example, the grant rate for Albanians reduced from 53% in June last year to 19% in June this year, and it has fallen further since, as that remains unacceptably high. Last month, we added India and Georgia to the list of safe states to speed up the process of returning people who have travelled from those countries to the United Kingdom illegally. Clearly there is more work to be done, and we do not want to create any additional pull factor to the United Kingdom.

James Morris: In relation to the Rwanda policy, the Home Secretary was quoted as saying:

“My frustration is that we have allowed the narrative to be created that this was the be-all and end-all”

of Government policy. Does the Minister agree with the Home Secretary? If he does, what is the Government’s policy on combating the boats and resisting illegal migration, and what is our policy?

Robert Jenrick: When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I set out our comprehensive plan this time last year, it had many facets, one of which—an extremely important component of which—was our Rwanda plan, but that was not its only element, and we have worked intensively over the last 12 months on each and every other facet of that plan. Opposition Members jeer, but is that plan working? Yes, it is. We can see that from the fact that we are almost the only country in Europe where the number of illegal entrants is falling. It has fallen by more than a third, compared to a 30% increase in the rest of Europe and almost a 100% increase in Italy.

None of that negates the importance of interjecting a further critical deterrent. That is the crucial element of the Rwanda scheme. The difference between those of us on the Government Benches and the Opposition is that, frankly, they do not want to stop the boats, and they do not have the stomach to do a policy like Rwanda.

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

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Since the previous Home Secretary was removed from her post, I think it is fair to say that the Immigration Minister has become a law unto himself. First, he briefed the media that he has been instructing the Prime Minister to tear up all our legal obligations to fix the unfixable Rwanda policy. Then he set himself on a collision course with his new Home Secretary by appearing to bet the house on the Rwanda flights taking off. To add insult to injury, he went behind his new boss’s back to present his laundry list to the Prime Minister, including a cap on social care visas and abolishing the shortage occupation list. Does the Immigration Minister have any respect whatsoever for the authority of the new Home Secretary? Given that he is said to be on resignation watch, will he confirm that he will resign if his proposals are rejected?

Robert Jenrick: Once again, we heard absolutely nothing from the Opposition about what they would actually do. The sad truth is that they have complete disdain for the British public. They do not appreciate that the public that we are sent here to represent demand that we reduce the levels of both legal and illegal migration. The Home Secretary and I will do absolutely everything in our power to achieve that. We are working closely with the Prime Minister, and we will set out further plans in due course. But the public watching the debate should be very clear: if they share our determination to tackle small boats or to reduce the numbers arriving in this country legally, they have only the Conservative Party to support.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the SNP spokesman.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Last week, a woman and a man died while attempting to cross the channel in a small boat; others in their group were hospitalised for hypothermia. Despite the clear risks, over 400 people in nine boats were detected crossing the channel in the past seven days. They clearly felt there was no other choice. The lack of safe and legal routes is putting people at risk. Will the Immigration Minister consider a humanitarian visa, as the Red Cross has recommended?

Robert Jenrick: All of us across the House abhor the deaths of individuals in the channel, and we are working closely with the French authorities to investigate the circumstances of those individuals' deaths. But those individuals, like anyone seeking to cross the channel, are coming from a place of evident safety. They are departing from France. They are in absolutely no danger. They are in a country with a fully functioning asylum system of its own. There is no excuse for those people breaking into our country, putting themselves in the hands of people smugglers. We should be united in trying to deter that.

On the hon. Lady's second question about safe and legal routes to the UK, she knows that we have issued more than half a million humanitarian visas since 2015—more than at any time in the history of this country. If she wants to do more, after the debate she should go straight back to the SNP Government and ask them to pull their weight and provide more safe spaces for asylum seekers and refugees back in Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister is deflecting quite a lot. *[Interruption.]* Government Members would do well to listen because their systems are not working; they are failing people every single day. In the first nine months of 2023, a mere 279 Afghans arrived in the UK by safe and legal routes. For each one, 17 Afghans came across on small boats. Today, *The Independent* has laid out the story of a mother of four—an Afghan special forces soldier who served in a unit set up by Britain, trained and paid for by the British armed services—whose application under the Afghan relocations and assistance policy was denied, along with many others from commando force 333 and Afghan territorial force 444. Why is the Minister failing so many Afghans?

Robert Jenrick: We do not encourage anyone, whatever their circumstances, to come across illegally in a small boat. That is a criminal offence and it should not be encouraged. We have supported nearly 25,000 people to come from Afghanistan since the end of the war, which

compares extremely favourably to other European countries. We have issued more than half a million humanitarian visas, which is a record we should all be proud of. The Scottish National party always wants to make the UK out to be a small country, but that is not correct. The United Kingdom is a big-hearted country, and one of the world leading countries for resettlement—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have been here 20 minutes and have covered only two questions. We have a huge amount of business to get through, so can we please go faster? I would like brief questions and brief answers.

Defending Democracy Taskforce

3. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the Defending Democracy Taskforce in preventing foreign interference in the UK's democratic integrity. [900283]

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): It is a great pleasure to tell the hon. Lady that the Defending Democracy Taskforce, which was set up under the National Security Council, has been operating for about a year and is working closely with parliamentary authorities, devolved Administrations and local authorities around the country, alongside intelligence agencies, the police and opposite numbers from various parties. It has already updated many individuals across the House on different ways in which we can improve our own security and make sure that this country's democracy is safer. The fundamental way to protect our democracy is to get involved, so I urge anyone watching to join a party—any party, but particularly the Conservative party—and get involved in politics, to keep the United Kingdom Government working for the people of the United Kingdom.

Cat Smith: Given the huge importance of preventing foreign interference in our democracy, does the Minister agree that, for the purposes of transparency, Lord Cameron should declare all previous contacts with, and moneys earned from, foreign Governments after he left the office of Prime Minister and before he was appointed Foreign Secretary?

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point on how we keep our politics accountable. Rules are set out by this House, the other place, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and various other people on how we account for expenses, money raised and various forms of connection. She is right that those records must be kept up to date. The Prime Minister expects every Minister to do that, and I am very confident that the new Foreign Secretary—whom I congratulate—has done so.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Defending Democracy Taskforce has an important remit to defend our country and protect our sovereignty. Given the threats we face, it is vital that rapid progress is made. However, some matters require immediate attention. Can the Minister give an assurance that both the Three-Vodafone merger and the future ownership of *The Daily Telegraph* will be looked at, not just through the economic prism of competition but in accordance with the National Security and Investment Act 2021?

Tom Tugendhat: This is the first time that I have faced the hon. Gentleman across the Dispatch Box—last time we were side by side, so this is a bit of change. He raises some interesting and important points. The National Security and Investment Act was passed a little over a year ago, and the Deputy Prime Minister himself chairs the body that advises on it. That is incredibly important because, as we know, foreign ownership and control is a vital area of foreign influence in our Government and society. That is why we are looking not just at that, but at how the foreign media today are not just traditional media—some of whom we see represented up in the Press Gallery; some of them are even waving. Social media is now so important too. It is worth noting the recent Ofcom report that about a third of under-25s get their news from TikTok, which as we know has its algorithm written by individuals under the control of a foreign state—one that is not always friendly.

Students: Temporary Visas for Dependants

4. Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of providing temporary visas to the dependants of visiting students and academics when the dependants are living in conflict zones. [900284]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): There are a number of routes in the immigration rules allowing dependants to join family members in the United Kingdom. Where possible, people seeking to flee conflict zones should use those existing routes. In the past 12 months, we have allowed over 112,000 people to arrive under safe and legal routes, including over 6,000 family reunion cases.

Wendy Chamberlain: My constituent is on a student visa at St Andrews University. On 7 October, her five-year-old daughter was in northern Gaza staying with her grandmother. They have since had to flee south. We have had good engagement from the student policy team, but will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can reunify the family?

Robert Jenrick: I am very happy to look into the case with the hon. Lady. As a general rule, we believe migration should not be the first lever we pull in the event of humanitarian crises. We should be using the UK's diplomatic muscle, our overseas development aid, as the primary way in which the UK can have the greatest impact in the world, but there are always cases where we make exceptions.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Last week's net migration figures were completely unacceptable to the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, which is why the New Conservatives, helpfully, have a 12-point plan that the Minister for Immigration could copy and paste to ensure we get those figures down. Will he extend the closure of the student dependant route to students enrolled on a one-year research master's degree?

Robert Jenrick: First, we believe that the level of legal migration into this country is far too high. That has very profound impacts on access to public services, the productivity of our economy, and the ability of the UK to be a socially cohesive and united country. That is why we need to take action. We have already announced a

specific policy with respect to dependants, which comes into force at the beginning of next year. We think it will have a substantive impact on the levels of net migration, but, as the Prime Minister said, we are keeping all options under review and will take further action as required.

Asylum Seeker Accommodation

5. Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): What progress his Department has made on moving asylum seekers from hotels into less costly accommodation. [900285]

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): For the first time since the small boats crisis began, we are now closing asylum hotels, thanks to the good work done to reduce arrivals by more than a third; to the delivery of more appropriate forms of accommodation, such as on large disused military sites; and to better management of the existing permanent estate. I am pleased to report that the Home Office is making good progress on the first 50 hotels, which will exit by the end of January. We will be bringing forward a further tranche shortly.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply. On behalf of constituents who have asked me, can he please go further and give a more definite date for the start and completion of the decant of asylum seekers at the Newton Park Hotel in South Derbyshire?

Robert Jenrick: When I first took this job, I was clear that the use of asylum hotels was completely unacceptable and that I would work with all in Government to ensure that we closed each and every one of them as quickly as possible. We are now in the process of closing those hotels. As I said in my opening remarks, the first 50 are closing seamlessly, so I expect to be in a position to announce the next set of hotel closures very soon.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Surely if asylum seekers had the right to work they would be able to pay for their own accommodation at little or no cost to the taxpayer.

Robert Jenrick: No, I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman. It is extremely important that we reduce the pull factors to the United Kingdom. There are already plenty of reasons why economic migrants would want to make a life in the UK. Enabling them to work as soon as they arrive here would only exacerbate those problems.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I am really pleased that the Government have been able to reduce the number of asylum seekers in hotels. The use of the Atlantic Hotel in Chelmsford for families is putting considerable pressure on our school places, especially as Chelmsford is already very short of school places due to the large numbers of people who have arrived from Ukraine and elsewhere. Will the Minister look again at the policy and ensure that when people with children of school age are placed in hotels, they are put in places where there are schools that have places?

Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend and I have discussed this many times, and I want to ensure that that particular hotel is closed as quickly as possible, because it is having such an impact on her local community. The Home Office is working with her local authority, and we have made a commitment that we will not place further young people, or families with young people, in that hotel if school places are not readily available. However, I hope that the hotel itself will close very soon.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When asylum seekers requiring medical care are moved to a new location out of area, they go to the bottom of the waiting list, and as a result their health requirements are not met in a timely way. How will the Minister ensure that they do not slip back from receiving medical care that they urgently require?

Robert Jenrick: When moving asylum seekers from one form of accommodation to another, we make provision to ensure that there is support for those with the most serious medical conditions, but it is important that we are able to move individuals around the estate, and we are currently in the process of closing hotels. That is our No. 1 priority, because the public want us to close them as quickly as possible.

Illegal Migration

6. **Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con):** What steps he is taking to tackle illegal migration. [900286]

9. **Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con):** What steps he is taking to tackle illegal migration. [900289]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): The Government have a plan to tackle illegal migration by means of a number of methods, and that plan is working. Small-boat crossings are down compared with those in other countries across Europe, where they are up. We are working closely with our international partners, including our nearest geographical neighbour France, we are dismantling the organised criminal gangs who are smuggling people, and we are taking action to reform the asylum system.

Miriam Cates: Following the Supreme Court ruling, the Government announced emergency legislation to address the issues mentioned in the judgment. I welcome the proposed new treaty with Rwanda, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the new legislation promised by the Prime Minister must be clear and unambiguous in establishing that the sovereign will of this Parliament, as expressed in primary legislation, takes legal precedence over the interpretation of international treaties and principles?

James Cleverly: I can assure my hon. Friend that the excellent working relationship we have with Rwanda—on which I worked in my former role—will give us the opportunity to have a treaty that addresses the issues in the Supreme Court judgment. However, she is right to say that the legislation that will accompany that treaty must make it absolutely clear that the will of the British people, as exemplified by the actions of this Government,

means we will work to get flights to Rwanda to make it plain that if people come here illegally they will not stay here. I can give her my commitment that we will do everything we can to make that happen.

Jack Brereton: Further to those points, will my right hon. Friend give me a categorical assurance that he will do everything he can to enable us to deliver the Rwanda policy, and will introduce all the necessary legal exemptions so that we can get on with those flights as soon as possible and provide the necessary deterrence to illegal migration?

James Cleverly: The Rwanda scheme is an extremely important part of our basket of responses. I will do everything to ensure that we drive down small-boat arrivals: that is the promise we have made to the British people, and that is the commitment I will deliver.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): One of the ways of dealing with illegal migration is to look at the number of cases. Can the Home Secretary say how many legacy backlog cases there are—if they have yet been triaged—and how many of those result from illegal migration?

James Cleverly: The historic backlog has been reduced by 65%. It has fallen by more than 59,000 cases since the end of November 2022. We have recruited 2,500 asylum decision makers, and we have increased tenfold the pace at which these decisions are made.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Secretary of State is well aware that under international law an asylum seeker cannot be described as an illegal immigrant. They are here legally unless and until they are found to have no valid claim to asylum after due process. Is it the policy of the Home Office and this Government to act within international law or to act outwith it?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes reference to the refugee convention, but his definition is only accurate if they come directly from a place of danger. I have visited France and it is a wonderful country. I can assure the House that it is not a dangerous country.

Violence against Women and Girls

7. **Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con):** What steps he is taking to tackle violence against women and girls. [900287]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Laura Farris): In the last three years we have passed comprehensive new laws covering everything from domestic abuse and street harassment to online safety. Last year the Government added violence against women to the strategic policing requirement, placing it on equivalent footing to terrorism, and the Home Office's award-winning Enough campaign is now entering its final phase with a firm focus on tackling perpetrator behaviour being rolled out across colleges and universities.

Julie Marson: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place. I pay tribute to Sandra Conte and her team at Future Living in Hertford for everything they do to support victims of domestic abuse. As a magistrate, I specialised in domestic abuse courts and I am utterly convinced of

their value, both for justice and for victims. Will my hon. Friend share her assessment of the initiatives to increase specialisation in court processes for sexual offending and sexual violence?

Laura Farris: The specialist sexual violence support project is now under way in Crown courts in Leeds, Newcastle and Snaresbrook. It is at an early stage but is due to report in early 2025. However, my hon. Friend should be aware that any victim of rape or sexual assault may now take advantage of section 28 procedures, which have been rolled out nationwide to allow people to give their evidence privately and ahead of trial. We are also engaging close to 1,000 independent sexual violence advisers in the system to accompany victims every step of the way through the criminal justice system. As a result, rape prosecutions are higher today than they were in 2010 and sentences are approximately 50% longer.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Can the Minister tell me how many forces are still not providing domestic abuse training to their officers?

Laura Farris: I do not have that answer. I will have to go back to the Home Office and write to the hon. Member.

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

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a privilege to take on this important role. I pass on my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her dedication and commitment. I am looking forward to getting to work.

A shocking new study has found that domestic abusers are controlling the finances of more than 5 million women in the UK. This cannot be allowed to continue. The Government have turned a blind eye to this issue for more than a decade, so what steps is the Minister taking today to tackle economic abuse?

Laura Farris: The hon. Lady and I have worked together a lot on domestic abuse since we were elected. She will know that economic abuse is basically a derivative of coercive control, which Clare Wade KC, in her review of domestic homicide, says underpins almost all domestic abuse. Tomorrow the Criminal Justice Bill has its Second Reading in the House. The Bill will see serious coercive control offences placed under the multi-agency public protection arrangements and offenders placed on the violent sexual and terrorist offender register.

Rwanda Relocation Scheme: Supreme Court Judgment

8. **Steven Bonnar** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the Supreme Court judgment of 15 November 2023 on the Rwanda relocation scheme. [900288]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): The Rwanda scheme remains an important part of our response to illegal migration and people smuggling. We will continue to negotiate with the Government of Rwanda on a treaty that will be

underpinned by domestic law so that the Rwanda scheme will join the other effective parts of our response in stopping the boats.

Steven Bonnar: The Prime Minister has indicated his intention to override the Supreme Court by introducing emergency laws and a new treaty with Rwanda to save his unlawful deportation plans. So far, the UK has paid the Rwanda Government £140 million and the Home Office has spent £1.4 million on failed legal challenges, with no asylum seekers being sent there as of yet. How much has the Home Office spent in total on the Rwanda scheme? Can the Secretary of State give us a figure, please?

James Cleverly: The funding from the Home Office will be reported in the usual, appropriate way. I do not have the figures to hand, but I will make sure the House is updated on the costs.

The hon. Gentleman seems to misunderstand how one responds to a legal judgment. He describes it as “overriding,” but I suggest that when the Government address the issues set down by the Supreme Court, they will not be overriding but respecting the voice of the Supreme Court.

I would make the point that we are committed to dealing with illegal migrants. I hear no such commitment from the Opposition. Until they come up with clear plans for how they will deal with this issue, they should support the actions the Government are actually taking.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Has the Home Secretary been struck, as I have, by the very small number of Opposition Members standing to contribute to questions on migration? Does he agree that, if democracies both within the EU and, like ourselves, outside the EU cannot find a solution to this problem, we will see the increasing emergence of far-right politicians in positions of power? That ought to frighten us all.

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Government were criticised by the Opposition and by voices across the continent when we started to take action to address the significant increase in the volumes of illegal migration. Countries across the continent are now looking at us in order to emulate the actions we are taking. Illegal migration has gone from something that the Labour party believed was a non-issue to being a core issue for Governments across Europe and North America. If the good people do not grip this issue, the bad people will attempt to do so, and I will never let that happen.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee has taken a particular interest in small-boat crossings. We produced a report last year that I suggest the new Home Secretary might want to look at. We have also visited France and Belgium this year. Owing to our interest and expertise in this area, will the Home Secretary consider giving the Home Affairs Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights the opportunity to carry out pre-legislative scrutiny of any emergency legislation that he plans to bring forward?

James Cleverly: There is an urgency to the legislation that we seek to put forward and, although pre-legislative scrutiny has a part to play, I will not do anything that delays the implementation of this incredibly important legislation.

Sir Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): It is imperative if we are to crack the business model of the evil people smugglers that we operationalise the Rwanda scheme. May I register my profound conviction that the disapplication of elements of the European convention on human rights and the refugee convention will be necessary? The Court of Appeal cited human rights and the Supreme Court cited refoulement. What will it be next time, in the absence of Parliament expressly asserting the will of this House?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, although I do not want to prejudge the content of the Bill. I listened carefully to his points, and he and the rest of the House should understand that we will do everything we can to ensure that we break the business model of the evil people smugglers he highlights and drive down the small-boat arrivals. He is absolutely right that the deterrent effect of the Rwanda scheme is a key element of that multi-strand approach.

Police Funding Formula

12. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What progress his Department has made on reviewing the police funding formula. [900292]

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a tireless campaigner on this issue. I completely accept the need for a new police funding formula. We have been working on it extremely hard, with colleagues across government. I hope to have something further to say on the topic shortly, but in the meantime we are getting as much money as we can to frontline policing. This year, we have an extra £550 million going to frontline policing and £330 million going to support the police pay rise, which makes £880 million extra for policing this year.

Peter Aldous: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. Nevertheless, it is concerning that Suffolk police were promised draft proposals for the review back in January. I urge him to get those to our local force as quickly as possible and, in the meantime, to work with it to improve the number of out-of-court disposals, where better delivery will relieve pressure on those in the force, who are working incredibly hard.

Chris Philp: They are indeed working incredibly hard. I am delighted to tell the House that Suffolk police currently have 1,425 officers, which is more than at any time in their history, and they have that in common with England and Wales as a whole. I support what my hon. Friend said about out-of-court disposals, which have an important role to play, particularly in treating drug and alcohol addiction, and mental health issues. I will work with Suffolk and other forces to make sure that those are widely used.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Since 2010, neighbourhood policing, where officers are embedded in local communities, has been decimated, despite its huge advantages. We therefore desperately need the repeatedly promised reform of the police funding formula. However, one of the quickest ways in which the Government can get cash to police forces for neighbourhood policing is by reforming the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 rules so that more of the money is handed to the police forces that confiscated it. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the matter further?

Chris Philp: I would be happy to discuss POCA with the hon. Gentleman and other colleagues. However, there is something of a definitional confusion on this question about neighbourhood policing, because there are local police officers who work on response teams and should be counted as well. In 2015, the year the Opposition keep referring to, there were 61,083 officers in local policing roles, whereas there are now 67,785. That is a much higher number, and overall we have a record number of officers across England and Wales—149,566. That is more than there ever were under the last Labour Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We must move now to topical questions.

Topical Questions

T1. [900306] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): My mission and that of this Government, on behalf of all people in this country, is to secure our borders and keep people safe from crime and terrorism. Good progress has been made in driving down crime and stopping illegal small-boat arrivals, but there is, of course, more to do. The Home Office has been considering further measures to mitigate migration, including by preventing the exploitation and manipulation of our visa system and clamping down on those who take unwarranted advantage of the flexibilities we provide. We will announce further details on these measures in due course. Tomorrow, we have Second Reading of the Criminal Justice Bill, which will give police the powers they need for longer sentences for those who would harm others and will increase the trust in policing.

Judith Cummins: In my constituency, the antisocial and illegal use of fireworks continues to affect law-abiding citizens and our pets. Will the Secretary of State commit to reducing the legal limit for commercial fireworks from 120 dB to 90 dB or less?

James Cleverly: I have not yet had the opportunity to read into that issue—it was not the angle I was expecting in this question—but the proposal seems a thoughtful one. I will give it due consideration, but I cannot make a commitment at this point.

T3. [900308] **Jill Mortimer** (Hartlepool) (Con): Off-road bikes are a growing plague across Hartlepool, and my constituents face the danger of young men in balaclavas

driving recklessly along our streets. Will my right hon. Friend commit to increasing the support for Cleveland police to tackle this nuisance, beyond the anonymous tip-off system? Will he also perhaps come to visit some of the excellent Conservative MPs in our region?

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp):

I would be delighted to do that, and I support her call. To achieve precisely the objectives my hon. Friend describes, from April next year—in just a few months—every police force in the country will receive substantial funding commitments to conduct antisocial behaviour hotspot patrols, including against the scourge of off-road biking that she mentions. In forces where pilot schemes have been tried, including those in Essex, Lancashire and Staffordshire, we have seen reductions in antisocial behaviour of up to 30%.

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

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary has been in post for two weeks, during which time he has used the same language to pick a fight with Stockton and show what he thinks of his own Rwanda policy, he has been attacked by his Back Benchers, and Downing Street has already been forced to confirm it still has full confidence in him. Twelve days ago he said the number of asylum hotel bed spaces are down, but four days ago Home Office figures showed they are up to a record 56,000—10,000 more than at the beginning of the year. Does he even know what is going on?

James Cleverly: Yes, I do. Let me expand—that answer was a by-product of the right hon. Lady asking a closed question at the Dispatch Box. I have been in this job for 14 days, and I am conscious that my counterparts around Europe and the world are grappling with many of the same issues. I would love nothing more than to be able to resolve them all in 14 days—I am good, but I am not a magician.

Yvette Cooper: Perhaps that mean an end to the magical thinking that the right hon. Gentleman's predecessor called for. We still have 10,000 more bed spaces than when the Prime Minister promised to end hotel use. The Home Secretary owes the House the facts. There is still no sign of anything on the failed Rwanda plan, because he knows it will not work, and nothing on the trebling of net migration to tackle the skills gaps that are driving work visas. The Government have been in power for 13 years and all we have is chaos and briefing wars. His Back Benchers are already calling him "Colonel Calamity", and he has Corporal Chaos next to him on the Front Bench. Given the mess he has inherited and his penchant for profanity, does he accept that he is now up a certain kind of creek without a paddle?

James Cleverly: The right hon. Lady is someone I admire hugely, and one of the things I admire most is how she has managed to be at the Dispatch Box twice but has failed to ask anything resembling a sensible question about the issues we are discussing. When her party was in government, it addressed the volumes of migration by simply redefining people, wiping the slate clean and pretending there was never a problem.

I have said this about the right hon. Lady's party in broadcasts, and I say it from the Dispatch Box: there is a gaping vacuum where the Labour party's policy on migration, whether it be legal or illegal, should be. Unless and until Labour Members come up with something approaching a policy, I will continue to do what we know to be right: driving down small-boat arrivals and reducing the number of hotel rooms needed. We have closed 50 hotels and we will do more.

T5. [900310] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Is the Home Secretary doing enough to reassure Jews that the United Kingdom is safe?

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend asks an incredibly important question. I have made it very clear to the police forces of the UK that when members of a minority group in this country tell us that they are living in fear, we must take action. I am pleased that the policing response this weekend was more robust than on previous weekends—the police are clearly listening to the conversations we are having with them and I commend them for doing so. I have spoken with representatives of the Community Security Trust and the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and I will be having a meeting with the Chief Rabbi to make it absolutely clear that the Jewish community in the UK has the right to feel safe and this Government will take action to ensure it is safe.

T2. [900307] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Many of my constituents have faced significant delays when applying for biometric residence permit cards because of technical errors. One constituent, whose application was approved in July 2020, did not receive their BRP until January 2023 because of printing issues. What actions are being taken to address the technical problems contributing to delays in processing BRP applications? I hope the Home Secretary can answer that question.

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): I am pleased to report to the hon. Lady that that part of our Visas and Immigration service is now operating within its service standard, so there is a good service being offered to members of the public, but if she has any specific cases, she can bring them to my attention.

T7. [900312] **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): As a local authority closely tied to Heathrow airport, the London Borough of Hillingdon has been doing great work to manage the impact of those currently in the asylum process. That is despite a funding imbalance in national rates, given the local population and the numbers of asylum seekers. Will my right hon. Friend commit to work with me to look at how we can ensure that those authorities, such as Hillingdon Council, linked with major ports of entry are given the resources to cope with such demands?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend raises an important matter for his constituents. As they live in the local authority beside Heathrow airport, it is true that his constituents bear a particular burden with respect to asylum seekers. We do provide £3,500 per asylum seeker to a local authority to help meet those costs, but a local authority such as Hillingdon does need our support, and I would be delighted to work with him in that regard.

T4. [900309] **Mick Whitley** (Birkenhead) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be familiar with the invasive surveillance systems that authoritarian states such as Russia and China impose on their citizens. Is he comfortable with the Policing Minister's push for similar live facial recognition systems to be used on innocent Brits, at a time when our colleagues in the European Parliament are legislating to abandon this technology?

Chris Philp: We should be clear that retrospective facial recognition puts hundreds, if not thousands, of criminals in prison. For example, it was used to catch a murderer who had killed somebody in a Coventry nightclub who was then identified using an image taken on a mobile phone. That is a murderer who would not be in prison but for the use of retrospective facial recognition.

Live facial recognition has been used extensively by two police forces and experimentally by two others, including by South Wales, which has an excellent Labour police and crime commissioner, Alun Michael, who has led the way in this area in a way that is safe and that respects privacy. Critically, if someone's face is scanned and they are not on the wanted list, their details are deleted immediately, which I hope provides reassurance on the questions of privacy. Where it has been used, wanted people, including a wanted rapist and a wanted sex offender, have been apprehended who otherwise would have gone free. I would hope that the entire House can agree that catching wanted rapists is something that we can all get behind.

T8. [900313] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): During the recent protests, we have seen politicians hounded out of their offices and even needing a police escort at a train station. What more can we do to ensure that people who make decisions are doing it fairly and not from intimidation?

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. That is exactly why we are having an emergency meeting of the Defending Democracy Taskforce tomorrow to assess these issues. The incidents that we have seen in this country since 7 October—absolutely hateful incidents—have left some people feeling unable to make the arguments that their constituents would expect them to make because they feel vulnerable or they feel threatened. That is why I have been engaging on a protective security review not just for the Government, but for all Members of this House, and for other elected officials around our country. It is completely wrong for our democracy to be silenced by anyone, and it certainly should not be silenced by cowards.

T6. [900311] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): My constituent, Dr Lubna Hadoura, has given almost 30 years of service in a specialised role to our NHS. Today, all she can think about is her 84-year-old mum and other members of her family who are stuck in Gaza with no hope of escape. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet urgently with me and Dr Hadoura so that she can set out to him more powerfully than I ever could the urgent humanitarian and moral imperative to get the families of UK citizens out of Gaza before it is too late?

James Cleverly: The Government have a duty to British nationals, which we take very seriously. I recognise the plight of many non-British nationals in Gaza, which is why, in my previous role and now supporting the current Foreign Secretary, we have long pushed for a humanitarian pause. I am pleased that that is in place. We will continue to work with the international community and the countries in the region to ensure that support is given to the people in Gaza who need it and that action is taken to end this conflict, so that Israelis as well as the Palestinian people can live in peace and security.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): As we seek to reduce the backlog of asylum claims, there is a temptation to grant more economic migrants the right to remain here. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that there will be no slackening of the rules to root out economic migrants so that they can be returned to where they came from?

James Cleverly: The whole point of having border control is that we can ensure that our migration system supports our economy and our social cohesion. Both those things are important. We want to ensure that we are choosing the right people, in the right numbers, at the right pace. I give the House a categorical assurance that that will always underpin our thinking with regard to what future changes we might make to the legal migration processes.

T9. [900314] **Kenny MacAskill** (East Lothian) (Alba): It is not simply the decibel level of fireworks that is causing an issue; police officers in Scotland have been coming under attack, with fireworks used as weapons. The Scottish Parliament has control over the sale of fireworks but not their manufacture, as they are classified as explosives. Will the Minister guarantee that steps will be taken to tighten things up in order to reduce the use of these weapons? Failing that, will he simply devolve the powers so that the Scottish Parliament can act, as it has done on air weapons and drink-driving?

Chris Philp: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important point. The control of products is often a matter for the Department for Business and Trade, but since he has raised it at Home Office questions, I will happily take his point away and look into it carefully.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As was referenced earlier, there is growing concern in the retail trade about increases in shoplifting and, in particular, violence against shop workers. Does the Minister agree that we need custodial sentences for persistent offenders?

Chris Philp: Persistent offenders should certainly get sent to prison. There is no question about that. Of course, it is now a statutory aggravating factor if the victim of an assault is a retail worker. We are concerned, though, about retail crime. We do not want to end up in the same place as some American cities, such as San Francisco, with out-of-control looting. We want a zero-tolerance approach. That is why just a few weeks ago we launched with police a retail crime action plan, which will see police always follow up evidence, including CCTV evidence and the use of facial recognition technology; always attend where necessary to investigate, or where someone has been assaulted; and particularly target prolific offenders and criminal gangs.

T10. [900315] **Richard Foord** (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Given the revelation in recent weeks that the Home Secretary's predecessor struck a deal with the Prime Minister before she took up the post, and given that it is well known that the Home Secretary was very much enjoying his role as Foreign Secretary, will he tell the House what deal he might have struck with the Prime Minister before taking on this role?

James Cleverly: A fantastic question, well worth asking. The contract that all Ministers have is with the British people, to work hard on their behalf and to focus relentlessly on their priorities. That is something that every Government Minister takes seriously, and something totally lacking in the narrative coming from the Opposition Benches, including the Liberal Democrat Benches.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): The award-winning Cotswold Canals Trust volunteers have had enough of antisocial behaviour such as graffiti, dog mess and worrying drug paraphernalia everywhere. It is ruining their hard work on the canal network and is putting them at risk. Part of our successful approach to trying to tackle it is getting CCTV down the canals. Will my right hon. Friend let us know what is happening with the safer streets funding? Police and crime commissioner Chris Nelson and I have made an application, and we are waiting to hear about it.

Chris Philp: A round of safer streets funding was distributed for the current financial year, and we will make an announcement shortly about the following

financial year. More money will be available, and it will be up to police and crime commissioners to decide how they spend that money. We will also confirm shortly the roll-out of antisocial behaviour hotspot patrols across the entire country—across all 43 police forces in England and Wales. Where those have been trialled so far—in Essex, Staffordshire, Lancashire and elsewhere—we have seen 30% decreases in ASB. Pretty soon, that will be available in Gloucestershire as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes proceedings on questions.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will take points of order after the urgent question, unless they are directly relevant to what has just been said.

Alex Cunningham: It is directly associated with the Home Secretary.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is not directly relevant to a question that has just been answered—well, I am guessing it is not. *[Interruption.]* Order. We are moving on to a very important matter and I expect the House to be quiet to listen to the urgent question from Mr David Lammy.

Israel and Hamas: Humanitarian Pause

3.35 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the Israel-Gaza situation and the humanitarian pause.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for his question.

A tragedy is unfolding in the middle east. Israel has suffered the worst terror attack in its history and Palestinian civilians are experiencing a devastating and growing humanitarian crisis. As the Foreign Secretary made clear, last week's agreement was a crucial step towards providing relief to the families of the hostages and addressing the humanitarian emergency in Gaza. This pause has provided an important opportunity to ensure that much greater volumes of food, fuel and other life-saving aid can enter Gaza.

On 24 November the British Government announced a further £30 million of humanitarian assistance, tripling our existing aid budget for the Occupied Palestinian Territories this financial year. During the pause, the fourth UK aircraft, carrying 23 tonnes of humanitarian aid for Gaza, arrived in Egypt, bringing the total amount of UK humanitarian aid provided via British aircraft to 74 tonnes. That aid is now being dispersed to the United Nations to support critical food, water, health, shelter and protection needs in Gaza and to pre-position emergency supplies in the region.

Today is the fourth and final day of the agreement. The British Government are supportive of the current pause in hostilities continuing, but that is for the Israelis and others in the region to agree. We are clear that this pause should not be a one-off. The increased flow of fuel and relief supplies over the Rafah crossing accompanying the pause was welcome and must be sustained. This pause should act as a confidence-building mechanism for future pauses, including those solely on humanitarian grounds.

We welcome the intensive international co-operation, including efforts from Qatar and the USA, that led to this agreement and we thank partners for their continued work. We remain committed to making progress towards a two-state solution. Britain's long-standing position on the middle east peace process is clear. We support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. The UK will continue to work with all partners in the region to reach a long-term political solution that enables both Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful for the granting of this urgent question.

Holding the Government to account is a sacred duty of this House, but with Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton not here, this feels more like a game of "Where's Wally?" I start by asking the Minister what progress is being made with Mr Speaker to ensure that all Members can question the Foreign Secretary.

The past 72 hours have brought much-needed relief to Israel and Gaza. I pay tribute to the work of Qatar, Egypt, the United States and the Red Cross. The images

of hostages who have been released and reunited with their families have moved us all, but the situation remains bittersweet, with many more still captive and their families in agony.

In Gaza, the past few weeks have been an unimaginable nightmare for innocent Palestinians. The civilian death toll, which includes thousands of women and children, is shocking and intolerable. The increased flow of aid and fuel remains a fraction of what is required. More time is needed. We must urgently support the parties to reach an agreement to extend the cessation of hostilities, to secure the release of remaining hostages, to deliver more aid to ease the unacceptable humanitarian catastrophe and, crucially, to provide a stepping stone towards an enduring cessation of hostilities, ensuring that what follows the war is a durable political solution.

The danger is that the fighting will resume in mere hours. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, if the vital efforts to extend the cessation of hostilities fail, we cannot return to the situation of before the pause? We cannot go back to Hamas continuing rocket attacks on Israel, we cannot go back to unacceptable siege conditions in Gaza, and we cannot go back to the scenes of thousands of innocent Palestinians being killed.

The two-state solution remains the only credible basis for a lasting peace: a future in which Israel is secure from the threat of Hamas terrorists, in which Gaza is not occupied and its people are no longer displaced, and in which Palestinians and Israelis can enjoy security, dignity and human rights.

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for most of his comments and, in particular, his desire to ensure an extension of the cessation of hostilities. On what he said about the broader situation, the Opposition Front Benchers and the Government are in complete agreement.

The right hon. Gentleman asks what progress has been made in ensuring that the Foreign Office and the Government's foreign policy is subject to proper scrutiny in this House. I completely agree with him that there is a sacred duty—I think that is the term that he used—to ensure that all that scrutiny is made available. I just point out to him the extraordinary authority that a former Prime Minister can bring to bear in carrying out those tasks, as he will have seen from Lord Cameron's recent visit to the middle east. Lord Cameron is the most senior Foreign Minister in Europe—and, indeed, in the region—and I think that both sides of the House will see the benefit of that in the days and months to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): This is a serious matter. The UK's priority in the region is security and stability for the whole of the middle east, yet today Netanyahu plans to push forward with a special budget that will fund expansions of the settlements by over \$80 million. As a friend, we have a duty to say to Israel, "Do not proceed with this plan. It takes us further away from peace and, frankly, it will risk not only the truce, but the ability to get home hostages who are still held by their terrorist kidnappers." What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that we speak plainly to our friends?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for her comments. She is entirely right that Israel must comply with international humanitarian law, and must not only prosecute but punish those who have been involved in settler violence. The Government are delivering tough messages to all sides in this dreadful conflict, and we will continue to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the SNP spokesman.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for his statement, and I commend the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for the integrity and courage with which she raised her concerns.

Does the Minister agree that the only way we will see a lasting and just peace in the middle east is through the establishment of a two-state solution in which Israel and Palestine are recognised as equal sovereign states with equal rights and equal responsibilities to uphold international law? Given that there are now credible accusations of war crimes against both sides in this conflict, will the Government confirm that they will give full support to the International Criminal Court to investigate without fear or favour all allegations of war crimes, regardless of who is accused of them, so that any perpetrator of a war crime, regardless of whose friend or foe they may be, is brought to justice before the international courts? Given that it is an offence in international law to supply weapons where they may be used in the commission of a war crime, what recent reassessment have the Government made of the legality of their arms sales to the middle east?

Finally, I do not know whether the Minister was in the Chamber to hear my plea on behalf of my constituent Dr Lubna Hadoura—I have written to the Foreign Secretary specifically about her—but will he agree to meet urgently with me and her, and with the Home Secretary, so that we can find an effective way to get the families of UK nationals who are still stuck in Gaza out while the peace lasts? If we do not get them out during a ceasefire, we might not get them out at all.

Mr Mitchell: Both the Lord Chancellor and I have made clear the position in respect of the International Criminal Court. I set it out in the House: it is not for Government Ministers and politicians to address these matters, but for the prosecutor and the administration of the International Criminal Court.

The hon. Gentleman rightly identified future thinking as critical at this time. He will recall that the progress that was made at Oslo was on the back of the first intifada. That should give us some confidence in these dreadful sets of circumstances that we need to focus on the future, and a lot of thinking is going on in that respect. To address his point about the arms regime, he will know that the British Government have the toughest arms export regime in the world, and we adhere absolutely to that.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): During this lull in fighting, the whole House wants to see as many hostages as possible released and as much aid as possible getting in, but both sides are committed to recommence fighting. Does my right hon. Friend think it is time to call for a demilitarisation of Gaza in the

longer term, and to consider future governance, security and humanitarian plans? Will he consider a joint summit with the United States, bringing together all the stakeholders to look at the long-term implications of this conflict?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of looking to the medium and the long term, and of doing all that is necessary to bring together people of good will to make progress on the two-state solution. We want to see all hostages released as swiftly as possible, and we also want to see greater volumes of food, fuel, medicine and life-saving supplies getting into Gaza, principally through Rafah but also through any other plausible means.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Is it the Government's contention that further hostilities—the destruction of the south of Gaza in the way we have seen the north destroyed, with tens of thousands more killed—will lead easily to a permanent ceasefire, or will it simply embolden the militants?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is right about the very worrying position that exists in the south of Gaza at the moment. He will have seen that the United Nations and others are considering islands of deconfliction, particularly around Khan Yunis, including safe zones in order to dispense aid. But, like me, he will be very aware of the dangers experienced in other safe zones in the past, and the risks for civilians who are involved in them.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How can a two-state solution, which everybody says they want—everybody in this Chamber, at any rate—ever come to pass while Hamas remains in control of the Gaza strip?

Mr Mitchell: I do not think that anybody thinks that Hamas are going to remain in charge of the Gaza strip in the medium term, or anything longer than that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is great when the Minister gives very quick answers, which is what I asked him to do.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The prospect of the carnage simply resuming at the end of this pause is a really dreadful one. What is the Minister's assessment of the likelihood that the ceasefire might be made permanent if, over a period of some further days, all the hostages are released?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman will have seen the statements by the Israeli Government about the number of hostages to be released and the possibility of extending the pause in that respect. The view of the British Government is that we should do everything we can to ensure the hostages are released as speedily as possible. The longer that this pause continues, the greater chance there is for humanitarian aid to get into Gaza and for progress to be made.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that any ceasefire continuing should be linked to the release of more hostages? Is he concerned that Hamas are breaking the agreement in several ways, including by separating parents and their

children when releasing one but not the other? They have not even allowed the Red Cross to visit all remaining hostages, which has been a rule in conflict for over 100 years. Is he not concerned about these breaches?

Mr Mitchell: I am immensely concerned about the fate of all the hostages. As my right hon. and learned Friend will know, there were originally about 240 hostages, and as of midnight last night 58 hostages have managed to get out. At the same time, 117 prisoners have been released by the Israeli Government. The sooner that all the hostages are out, the better.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): Like others, I felt a real sense of relief watching some of the hostages who emerged and were reunited with their families yesterday. The Minister said that this pause could turn into a one-off; it need not. I know the issues are incredibly complicated and I know it is only through international intervention that we will make progress, but could he tell us what steps are being taken not to get to a two-state solution at this point, but to start a peace process between the warring factions that will eventually, one would hope, lead to a two-state solution? What steps are being taken now by international bodies?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. She speaks with great wisdom on these matters. I can tell her that the discussions to which she refers are going on throughout the region and internationally. Britain is playing a proper part, not least by the visit last week of the Foreign Secretary to the region.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I very much hope we can extend the humanitarian pause. The Minister, as a former serviceman, like me, will know that the United Kingdom armed forces make extraordinary efforts to avoid civilian casualties, even when targeting terrorists embedded in civilian areas—a point that has been made very forcefully to me by veterans in recent days—so will the United Kingdom carry on very clearly calling on Israel to follow similar standard operating procedures?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, and the Foreign Secretary, during his visit to Israel, made precisely that point.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The pause is obviously welcome because it will save lives. The horror of 7 October has not gone away. The disaster of the killing of 14,000 people in Gaza has not gone away. There has to be a recognition, as António Guterres has pointed out, of the underlying issue, which is the occupation of the west bank and the settlement policy, and the violence that so many Palestinians have had to put up with for decades and decades. Does the Minister believe there is a role now for the United Nations to do more to try to bring about not just a ceasefire, but a long-term peace that will involve the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Palestine?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman will know that there is always a role for the United Nations, but it has to be adapted to the circumstances. What he says about a ceasefire, which I have heard him say before, is fettered by the fact that Hamas have made it perfectly clear that they do not want a ceasefire. They want to

repeat what they did on 7 October, the day of those terrible events. To have a ceasefire, we have to have two sides that want a ceasefire, and that is clearly not available on this occasion.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): The conflict in the middle east is tragic, complex and, sadly, protracted. While the House is broadly aligned on the need to defeat Hamas, could the Minister please reassure me of the efforts being undertaken to urge restraint among all protagonists in the protection of civilians and non-combatants in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: Britain has been very clear about the importance of respecting international humanitarian law in all circumstances.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The Minister must be concerned by those who seek to play down what has actually happened to innocent Israelis in the middle east. He must be gutted and alarmed that Leo Varadkar, the Prime Minister of a neighbouring state of ours, described one of the victims, an eight-year-old girl who was kidnapped and abused, as “lost”. That is unbelievable. Is the Minister concerned by the ever-increasing extremism and the anti-NATO and antisemitic attitudes emanating now from the Republic of Ireland? Is he going to have a word with that country about its attitude?

Mr Mitchell: The Government have been absolutely clear on where we stand on antisemitism and Islamophobia: we condemn both without qualification and will continue to do so.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As the Minister knows, there has been no pause in violence in the west bank, whose largely defenceless population has been subjected over a number of months now to a campaign of what the Americans and French have referred to as “terror”. The Minister says he is asking tough questions and delivering tough messages to both sides, but when will those tough messages turn into tough action? The Americans have already said they will institute visa bans against those settlers who are perpetrating violence, but we have been talking about this for years to little or no effect. Given the centrality of achieving a two-state solution, is there not a strong case for us to take firm action against settlers, those who arm them and those who support them?

Mr Mitchell: On his visit last week, the Foreign Secretary delivered very strong messages, when he was in Ramallah and when he saw the Israeli Government, about the importance of stopping settler violence and ensuring that people are put before the courts and punished—that if the perpetrators of settler violence were identified, they could be put before the courts.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The release of hostages and the increase in humanitarian aid is very much to be welcomed, but I am sure the Minister and the House agree that only a political solution can bring about a lasting peace. In that spirit, will he support Labour's calls for a new middle east envoy? Also, I was not quite clear from his answer to the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, so will he say that the UK state condemns and is utterly opposed to the settlements?

Mr Mitchell: The position of the British Government on the illegal settlements is absolutely clear. On the possibility of having an envoy, a whole range of different envoys are engaged in this, but if it was appropriate for us to deploy an envoy on behalf of the Government—either a humanitarian or political envoy around the region—we would have no hesitation in doing so.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Despite the pause over the last few days, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains catastrophic and is likely to continue to be catastrophic. While no one doubts the right of Israel to defend itself, the fact is that it is an occupying power and as such has clear legal obligations to the civilians of Gaza, so when my right hon. Friend next speaks to his Israeli opposite number will he remind him of those obligations and ensure that even after the pause ends sufficient aid is allowed to get through to the population of Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: We are doing everything we can through the United Nations and other contacts in the region to ensure that aid and support gets through to those who need it so desperately in Gaza, and my right hon. Friend may rest assured that we will continue to do that.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The massacre by Hamas on 7 October is completely indefensible, but the Minister will be aware that since then no fewer than 5,500 Gaza children have died and there are hundreds more missing, probably under rubble. The Secretary-General of the UN said Gaza is “a graveyard for children” and most recently the executive director of UNICEF has said that pauses are not enough and only a ceasefire will save children. When are the Government going to use their good offices to press both sides for a ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: Regardless of whether the right hon. Lady’s figures are correct, we know that there has been appalling loss of civilian life in Gaza. In respect of what she says about the relative merits of a pause or ceasefire, we can build on pauses, but I point out that it is the policy of those on the Opposition Front Bench and the Government to press for humanitarian pauses, and that is what the British Government will continue to do.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The release of some hostages is incredibly welcome, but the price for that is that Israel has taken the difficult decision to release many Palestinian prisoners held for terror offences, including bombings and stabbing attacks, in exchange for its civilians held in Gaza in unimaginable conditions. History shows us that previous security prisoners released by Israel have gone on to commit further terror offences. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this should be of concern to the whole world and that we must continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Israel to support it to combat terror?

Mr Mitchell: The point that my hon. Friend makes, particularly about prisoners reoffending, underlines the importance of our pursuing every possible way of getting on to a political track. When this ghastly violence finishes, or is significantly diminished, everyone must bend every conceivable sinew to drive forward a new political process for peace.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Few of us can imagine the trauma of being permanently displaced from our homes and never allowed to return. Can the Minister reassure the House that Israel will not take land in Gaza, as some Israeli Ministers have threatened to do, and that Palestinians will be allowed back to their homes and lands, particularly given that 1.7 million out of 2.3 million people living in Gaza have been displaced?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. and learned Lady is right to talk about the deeply contentious issue of land, but what she says is, as I have understood it, absolutely in accordance with the policy of the British Government.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the pogrom that took place on 7 October, followed by the horrific levels of antisemitism that we have seen across our own country, let alone across the western world, with people feeling frightened to leave their homes for no other reason than their religion, shows why the state of Israel has a right to exist and must always be allowed to defend itself?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is entirely correct. What happened on 7 October was a pogrom, and it was the worst loss of life by Jewish citizens on any single day since the holocaust and 1945.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his assistance in getting some of our constituents from Birmingham out of Gaza. On his answer to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), for clarity can he state explicitly that UK Government policy is that every displaced Gazan currently must be allowed to return to their lands?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind remarks, and I remind Members from all parts of the House to use the hotline to communicate with the emergency centre in the Foreign Office on behalf of constituents. In terms of the Gazans who have been displaced by the terrible events started by Hamas on 7 October, it is the British Government’s policy that those displaced should be able to return to the area from which they were driven.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The mayor of Gaza City told al-Jazeera that not one litre of fuel has reached the Gaza municipality, likely due to the fuel being misappropriated. Why does the Minister think that the international community should trust Hamas to distribute any aid?

Mr Mitchell: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we are extremely careful about how British aid is distributed and do it only through trusted partners of whom we have long and detailed experience. This is perhaps the most observed and scrutinised aid programme of any that the British taxpayer and British Government pursue anywhere in the world.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): In Home Office questions, I raised the case of a constituent on a student visa whose five-year-old daughter is in southern Gaza, and I am hoping for a similarly positive response from this Minister. Were that visa to be granted, would

that young girl be allowed to travel with her grandmother into Egypt with the FCDO's support so that they can be reunited?

Mr Mitchell: It is unwise and difficult for me to give granular advice on that specific situation from the Dispatch Box, but I will happily speak to the hon. Lady immediately afterwards and ensure that we do the best we can.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's remarks about increasing aid to Gaza and the Palestinian people at this time, and I note what he said about the care taken to ensure that British aid reaches its intended target, but given what we now know about the industrial scale of theft and misappropriation of aid in Gaza over the years, who is making sure on the ground right now that British aid is not being taken by Hamas terrorists?

Mr Mitchell: For aid in Gaza, we have not dealt with either the Palestinian Authority or the Hamas civil administration for many years, and we do everything we can to ensure that it gets through to the people who need it. He will have seen that, I think yesterday, a British aircraft delivered 4,500 blankets and 4,500 sleeping mats to al-Arish in Egypt. That was the fourth planeload. We will continue to ensure not only that we supply as much aid as we possibly can to meet the need, but that it gets to the right place as speedily as possible.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Does the Minister share my grave concerns about what Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent chilling comments—that "Nothing will stop us" and that he will fight "until the end"—will mean for Palestine and the further massacring of innocent civilians? We need an urgent ceasefire to prevent the further loss of life. How many more Palestinian children must die before the Government will call for a permanent ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: Israel absolutely has the right to defend itself, following the appalling events of 7 October. Of course, civilians, as well as hospitals, must be protected under international humanitarian law, but the hon. Member should be in no doubt that the Israeli Government have the absolute right to defend themselves under international law.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The recent discovery of a tunnel from the Shifa Hospital to a residential property is yet more clear evidence that Hamas are using civilians as human shields in this conflict. Will the Minister therefore join me in clearly condemning that activity, and will he confirm that the Government will continue to support Israel in its fight to eradicate Hamas from the region?

Mr Mitchell: Yes.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, call for the pause to transition into a ceasefire. What discussions have the Minister and the Foreign Secretary had about opening up corridors for humanitarian aid to cross between Israel and Gaza, in the light of the poor infrastructure in Gaza for moving humanitarian aid from the south to the north?

Mr Mitchell: We are in those discussions. As the hon. Member will know, the access through Rafah is fettered by physical and non-physical circumstances. When the Foreign Secretary was in the region last week, he had specific discussions about other means of access into Gaza, and we are doing everything we possibly can, together with our humanitarian partners, to achieve a far greater degree of access for humanitarian supplies.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): From the perspective of my constituents in Bolton, we are watching the worst horror movie conceivable, and hitting pause will only delay the suffering. Boltonians are asking: when can all sides simply hit the stop button and bring about a ceasefire? If a ceasefire is not possible, what discussions are we having with Israeli and other counterparts about extending the pause after today?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend will have seen the discussions going on and the offer that, apparently, the Israeli Government have made if extra hostages are released. All those discussions are continuing. Clearly, the longer the pause, the more support and humanitarian supplies can get into Gaza. The British Government are doing everything they can to progress both those things.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's words that the Foreign Secretary is exploring other crossings being opened to get aid into the south. It is essential that that happens. If the hostilities resume, as most people expect, what representations are the British Government making to try to stop them moving south, where almost 2 million are displaced and there is nowhere else to go?

Mr Mitchell: I refer the hon. Lady to the reply I gave a little earlier about the south. We are conscious of the fact that very large numbers of people are kettled into the south, which makes the supply of aid even more dangerous, unless there is a comprehensive agreement that there will be no hostilities around the areas where aid is being distributed. We are very conscious of that, and we are working with our partners to make it as safe as possible for aid to be distributed.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is extremely good news that some hostages have been freed. However, polling suggests that 75% of the Palestinian people support the atrocities by Hamas, and 85% refuse to even consider the coexistence of a Palestinian state with the state of Israel. At the moment, Palestinian prisoners are being released to the west bank and Hamas are getting the credit, so does the Minister accept that there is a risk that Hamas not only dominate Gaza but end up dominating the west bank as well?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend's comment underlines the importance of a political track emerging and being pursued with great vigour as soon as possible.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I want to talk about the plight of women in Gaza, which a constituent raised with me. Every day, 180 women in Gaza give birth, most without water, painkillers, anaesthesia for caesarean sections, medical supplies or, as we know, electricity for incubators. With more than 5,000 women expected to give birth in Gaza next month, will the Minister join Labour in calling for Israel to protect

[Barbara Keeley]

hospitals in Gaza and allow continued access to medicine, food, water and electricity to protect those women and newborns during birth?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the very large numbers of women who are seeking to give birth in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. We are conscious of that in the aid and humanitarian supplies that we are making available. I completely understand the importance of the humanitarian support workers who are in Gaza—extremely brave people who are putting themselves in harm's way to support their fellow citizens with humanitarian supplies. Nowhere is that more true than in the area that she described.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It has been extremely moving to see hostages starting to come out and aid starting to flow in. I hope that the truce will hold, but if the hostilities start again, please can the UK Government make every representation to Israel that, in its legitimate efforts to stop the terrorism, it must do more to prevent mass loss of civilian life, especially children?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend speaks with experience and wisdom, and the answer is yes.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My constituent Adam Abu Warda has close family in Gaza and is extremely anxious that they should have the opportunity to get out and come to the UK, as other MPs have said. What is the Government's policy on our constituents wishing to get their very close family out of Gaza to bring them to the UK?

Mr Mitchell: We are seeking, within the rules the hon. Gentleman will be aware of, to facilitate, in every way we can, those people leaving Gaza. As I said to one of our colleagues, it would not be sensible for me to look at the granular detail of the specific case he raises on the Floor of the House but, if he has contacted the emergency consular support team in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and has any concerns about the responses he is getting, I am of course very happy, to look at it myself.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Three weeks ago today, my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) and I were at Kibbutz Kfar Aza, where we saw and heard things we will never forget, and where the smell of rotting blood and flesh was still pungent in the air, such was the butchery not only of Hamas but Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the thousands of Gazan civilians who streamed into the kibbutzim afterwards. There are some in this place who seem to give the impression that the only barriers to peace are the actions of the Israeli Government. The facts are that it is Hamas who are responsible for every death that occurs. It is the Palestinian Authority whose textbooks preach hate against Jews, not just in Israel but around the world. It is Palestinian Authority schools that were closed in a day of celebration after 7 October and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), hold such appalling views about coexistence. Will the Minister, in his dealings with the Palestinian Authority, encourage them to deal with their issues of extremism?

Mr Mitchell: I can tell my hon. Friend that the British Government are doing everything they can to address the issues behind what he says. I have no doubt, having been at that terrible location so recently, that that is something he will never forget.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What is the Minister's understanding and assessment of the Netanyahu Government's medium and long-term strategy for the Gaza strip?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman, who is extremely experienced in these matters, will draw his conclusions from what the Israeli Government are saying, just as the British Government do.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Now that the welcome temporary pause is under way, what steps are the UK Government taking to press to ensure that it becomes an enduring ceasefire as soon as possible, leading to a political process for peace? Are the UK Government being clear with the Israeli Government that, as they seek to continue in their legitimate aim of destroying Hamas, a return to the relentless bombardment, the razing of Gaza and the indiscriminate killing of civilians is not acceptable, proportionate or within international law?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Lady will know, Israel has an absolute right to self-defence. It has been made clear around the world that that is the right position, but it must abide by international humanitarian law.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Nobody can help but be moved by the sight of hostages being released. This weekend, the Minister for Immigration, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), on a public platform, said that the UK Government "will not rest until each and every one of them is back in the loving embrace of their families."

It is now more than a month since anybody at all from the UK Government has had any contact at all with the UK citizens who have family members as hostages—not a single phone call. The Minister will know that I have come to this place and pleaded with him to help arrange just five minutes of Lord Cameron's time with the hostage families to tell them what the Government are actually doing to help get their family members released. It has been other Governments who have helped to identify that their family members are alive. Please, finally, can the Minister listen to those UK citizens asking their Government, "What are you doing to help get my family released?" and arrange that meeting as an urgent matter?

Mr Mitchell: My understanding is not the same as the hon. Lady's in respect of the British hostages. She will know that over 200 British nationals and their dependants have so far left Gaza, and we are working around the clock to get the rest of those out who want to leave. In terms of the hostages, my understanding is not the same as she has said.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that we cannot accept civilians being ordered to flee into areas that are then subject to bombardment? Does he share the concerns of the UN and the World Health Organisation about the proposals for a safe zone with no infrastructure, which will cause more problems down the line?

Mr Mitchell: There are very serious problems with safe zones. We have learnt about them the hard way from the events that took place in Srebrenica, in—indeed—Rwanda, and in northern Iraq. It is an absolute preoccupation of humanitarians—including those in the United Nations, who are neuralgic about safe zones—to ensure that if we are to distribute very large amounts of aid we have the capacity to do so before too much longer, and we all hope that we are able to do it in the safest possible way.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I welcome the pause, with hostages released and aid delivered, and I hope that it continues. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the role that he has played to date, but if this drip, drip of hostage release is to continue, surely more must be done to ratchet up the pressure and ensure that the Red Cross and the Red Crescent gain access to the hostages about whom we have no information. Is that not a priority now?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, right: it is a priority. There is some suggestion that while I have been on my feet in the Chamber, Qatar has announced that the truce will be extended by two days. Obviously we all hope that that is true, and that as a result more hostages will be able to leave.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Minister is known for his humanitarian instincts. Does he agree that it is unthinkable now to resume the indiscriminate destruction of Gaza and the lives of Palestinian civilians? Is he urging on the Israeli Government the need to find a means of removing the threat from Hamas that does not cost the lives of thousands of women, children and other non-combatants?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman speaks with wisdom about the position of civilians. All of us hope that the loss of life among innocent civilians can be minimised, but I would point out to him that the Israeli Government have an absolute right to go after the murderous terrorists of Hamas who perpetrated the dreadful events of 7 October.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I have heard from a number of constituents in Glasgow North who are concerned that weapons either manufactured in the UK or sold by UK companies are being used in this conflict. Can the Minister say how regularly the UK is assessing its obligations under the arms trade treaty to ensure that arms are not being transferred when there is a risk of their being used to commit or facilitate breaches of international humanitarian law?

Mr Mitchell: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the British rules for the export of arms, scrutinised by the Committees on Arms Export Controls, provide for the toughest regulations anywhere in the world. If he ever believes that those rules have been infringed in any way, he should of course inform the requisite authorities.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Despite the four-day truce, there remains a humanitarian emergency in Gaza. We cannot return to the indiscriminate and unprecedented killing that we have seen take place on such a horrific scale over the last seven weeks; we need to see a lasting, permanent ceasefire. As I have been

repeatedly urging the Minister, will the Government use the UK's influence at this crucial moment to secure the ceasefire, so that we can see an end to the bloodshed and the war crimes, allow desperately needed aid to reach all parts of Gaza, and create space for the immediate return of all hostages and meaningful negotiations on a lasting peace?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman will know that we are doing everything we can to ensure that the aid and support to which he has referred reaches those who need it. Of course, if we build on a humanitarian pause, the longer the pause goes on and the longer there are meaningful negotiations in Qatar, or through Qatar, the better. The hon. Gentleman will also be aware, however, that it is the policy of his own Front Bench as well as the British Government not to call for a ceasefire—which, for the reasons I have given, would be impractical in any event—but to pursue the pauses that are desperately needed for humanitarian relief to arrive.

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that to prevent a catastrophic outbreak of waterborne diseases such as cholera, we need to see fresh water flowing and sanitation and hygiene supplies being delivered on a large scale, alongside key public health and medical support?

Mr Mitchell: Those are indeed the supplies that are necessary to stop the situation that the hon. Lady described developing further. There is a very real risk of waterborne diseases and cholera breaking out in Gaza, and that is why we are diligently pursuing the humanitarian policies I have set out in every way we can.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): No one would wish to withhold the aid that has been given to the innocent civilians—who, let's face it, are only suffering because of a war instigated by Hamas terrorists—but does the Minister agree that this cynical drip-feed release of hostages is a further act of terror by Hamas and that the pauses in the fighting will be used by them to regroup and rearm? Will he give me a reassurance that our Government will not fall into the trap of acceding to Hamas's incessant demands for indefinite pauses, rather than allowing the Israeli Government to do what they need to do, which is to engage in security action to destroy Hamas in their own dens?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Gentleman underlines the fact that Israel has every right to exercise its self-defence in rooting out the Hamas terrorists and murderers. The British Government are very clear that what he has said about that is absolutely right.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Given that Hamas have been crystal clear that they have no intention of ever wanting a permanent ceasefire, what discussions have been had with the Palestinian Authority to build its capacity and competence, to ensure the transition to a two-state solution?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Hamas and the ceasefire, with which I completely agree. In respect of building Palestinian capacity, he will know that Lord Cameron was in Ramallah

[Mr Mitchell]

last week discussing that and many other associated matters with President Abbas, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister there.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I was incredibly relieved to get my constituent's family, 13 of them, across the border and home through Egypt. I pay tribute to the staff in the consular section who supported them, but the support was patchy and the cost of them returning was over £5,000 on commercial flights. What more can the Minister do to supercharge that consular support and to reimburse those families who had to come home on commercial flights? Would he consider meeting my constituent's family to learn the lessons that they have experienced of having to flee in the middle of a bombardment?

Mr Mitchell: I will certainly be pleased to arrange for Foreign Office officials to meet the hon. Lady's constituent's family if she believes that there are lessons to be learned, but I also want to pay a special tribute to all the men and women who work in the emergency centre at the Foreign Office, who have often been working through the night throughout this emergency and have done so with huge diligence, tenacity and commitment.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): As many other Members have made clear, a two-state solution is critical to a lasting peace. So, given the announcements made today, can the Minister make clear the UK's complete opposition to illegal settlements in the west bank?

Mr Mitchell: The position of the British Government—and, I believe, the Opposition—is one of complete opposition to illegal settlements.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): Many of us believe that a humanitarian pause is inadequate, as Israeli aggression continues unabated, but that would be as nothing in terms of a failure to support a ceasefire if Britain were to be complicit in any way with Israeli aggression. Can the Minister give us an assurance that the base at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus is not being used by the US military to supply Israel, and that British military and intelligence sites in Cyprus will likewise not be used to support Israel or America in this conflict?

Mr Mitchell: I think the hon. Gentleman confuses the role of the British Government, which has been set out clearly by the Prime Minister and by me in the House. He will also know that when it comes to the use of intelligence assets and so forth, we do not discuss those matters across the Floor of the House.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): It was welcome this weekend to see the release of Israeli child hostages. It was also welcome a moment ago to hear the Minister talk about a possible two-day extension to the pause in fighting. We heard two weeks ago from the Israeli Foreign Minister, who said:

"Israel has some two or three weeks until international pressure seriously begins to increase".

He said that the pressure was "not particularly high" but was increasing. Given that the Israeli Government were not feeling pressured internationally a fortnight ago, how can the Minister be sure that the pressure from the UK Government is being felt now, so that the rules of engagement of the Israel Defence Forces will distinguish between terrorists and civilians?

Mr Mitchell: The people who serve in the Israel Defence Forces are taught, as part of their basic training, the importance of abiding by international humanitarian law. I would contrast the Israel Defence Forces, who seek to defend Israeli citizens, with Hamas, who seek to use their citizens to defend Hamas.

Points of Order

4.30 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have advised the respective offices of the Members of this House whom I will refer to in this point of order.

It is extremely sad that the Home Secretary has not the guts to admit to his appalling remark made about my Stockton North constituency from the Front Bench and apologise to the people I have the privilege of representing. There was quite a chain of events last week. After I raised the matter on the Floor of the House, the Home Secretary first denied he had said anything at all. The Government then sent out the Tory party chairman, the hon. Member for North West Durham (Mr Holden), to tell the media that no words had been uttered from the Treasury Bench. Next up, the Leader of the House said she had been told by the Home Secretary that he had not said anything and she believed him. She did not help matters by referring to Billington instead of Billingham.

The Home Secretary clearly took them both for fools, as he later admitted his foul language but tried to minimise the damage to his reputation by claiming his remark was aimed at me. Well, that is all right then, but it is untrue and has been shown to be untrue. My thanks go to *The Mirror* and the other wizards out there who have proved that to be the case.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman, who used the word “untrue.” I think he could find another way of expressing that, as I am sure he would not wish to say that a right hon. Member of this House had uttered something that is untrue.

Alex Cunningham: Madam Deputy Speaker, you offer me a considerable challenge. Perhaps the Home Secretary has inadvertently misled people across the country in relation to this particular matter.

This matters: people take notice of what the Home Secretary says and his talking down of Stockton and Teesside can have consequences. He may have whispered in your ear, Madam Deputy Speaker, but can you advise me on whether you have any powers to order him to return to the Dispatch Box to apologise in person for insulting Stockton, rather than hiding behind the half-truths uttered on his behalf by an official?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He will recall that I answered a similar point of order last week, when he raised one aspect of this matter. At that point, I reminded all Members of the need for good temper and moderation in the language they use in this Chamber.

The hon. Gentleman asks me if I have power to require the Home Secretary to return to the Chamber. I do not need such a power; the Home Secretary has voluntarily returned to the Chamber, and if he would care to make a point of order, further to that point of order, the Chamber will hear him.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. For the avoidance of doubt, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) accused

me of making derogatory remarks about his constituency. My response, issued through my office, was that I did not, would not and would never make such comments about his constituency. What I said was a comment about him. My apology was for using unparliamentary language, but I will make it absolutely clear, for the avoidance of doubt and with no ambiguity, that I did not, would not—

Alex Cunningham: You did.

James Cleverly: What are you calling me, sir?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) asked the Home Secretary to come back to the Chamber to issue an apology, and he is doing so. [HON. MEMBERS: “No, he isn’t.”] Enough. Hon. Gentlemen ought to hear what the Home Secretary has to say and not shout from a sedentary position—please.

James Cleverly: I know what I said. I rejected the accusation that I criticised the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. My criticism, which I made from a sedentary position about him, used inappropriate language, for which I apologise. But I will not accept that my criticism was of his constituency, because it was not.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Ind): You need a backbone!

James Cleverly: Then what are you saying, sir?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a debate, and the matter is now closed. The Home Secretary has rightly come to the Chamber. He has apologised to the hon. Member for Stockton North. That is an apology rightly due to him, and I hope he will accept it.

Alex Cunningham *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will briefly listen to the hon. Gentleman, but I wish to close this matter.

Alex Cunningham: I do not require any apology for an insult against me, because it did not happen. You have just intimidated, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the Home Secretary has apologised to me. He has not apologised to me. He has not apologised to the people of my constituency. He has apologised for using unparliamentary language.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has issued an apology. I require an apology for the use of unparliamentary language, and the right hon. Gentleman, the Home Secretary, has given that apology. It is my understanding that he has also apologised to the hon. Gentleman—whether the hon. Gentleman accepts it or not is a matter for him. I require an apology, the Home Secretary has issued that apology, and the matter is now closed. I must say that the people who elected us to this place expect us to concentrate now on the very serious matters that we have been discussing and that we are going on to discuss.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor’s autumn statement, the right hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), whom I have informed of this point of order, stated that

[Shaun Bailey]

the economy would be “£40 billion smaller” in 2027 than the Chancellor forecast in March. The Office for Budget Responsibility has stated that in fact in 2027 the economy will be £15 billion larger than the Chancellor stated in March, so there is a £55 billion gap between Labour’s words and economic reality. Let me ask a procedural point. If the right hon. Lady were a Minister, we could call for an urgent question or demand a statement, but how can Members of this House compel her to come here to correct the record and apologise for inadvertently misleading Members of this House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s point of order and for his having given me notice that he intended to make it. Will he confirm that he has informed the right hon. Lady of his intention to raise this matter?

Shaun Bailey indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I see that he is nodding to say that he has informed her. I am glad that he has done so. I have no ability to require a shadow spokesman to come to the House. It is Ministers who are responsible for answering to the House. I also say to the hon. Gentleman that it is not for the Chair to adjudicate on the interpretation of statistics. One person’s statistic is another person’s non-statistic. I have discerned that over many years in this Chamber. The hon. Gentleman has used the opportunity of a point of order to make his point.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful that the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), is still in his place because, as the urgent question illustrated, there is huge concern about unfolding events in the middle east. In the spirit of the updates and briefings to the House about Ukraine, would it be in order for the House to request regular statements on ongoing and unfolding events in the middle east, in order that it can reflect the concerns expressed from across the House, as illustrated by the responses to the urgent question?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, but I think he knows that was not a point of order for the Chair but a question he can ask of the business managers and the Leader of the House on Thursday mornings, when the Leader of the House takes questions. I see that the Minister is eager to answer the point. It is not a point of order, but given the sensitivity of the subject that we are discussing, I will allow the Minister to make his point.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I assure my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) that we in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are the servants of the House. We will do anything that the House requests in respect of fulfilling the role that he has identified, which we fulfilled in the early days of the Ukrainian war.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have never known the Minister not to relish an opportunity to come to the Dispatch Box and I am sure that we will hear from him many times in forthcoming weeks. Let us hope that it will be with good news, to counteract the bad news that he has had to deal with today and on other days.

BILL PRESENTED

LEASEHOLD AND FREEHOLD REFORM BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Michael Gove, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Oliver Dowden, Secretary Lucy Frazer and Lee Rowley, presented a Bill to make provision to amend the rights of tenants under long residential leases to acquire the freeholds of their houses, to extend the leases of their houses or flats, and to collectively enfranchise or manage the buildings containing their flats, to give such tenants the right to reduce the rent payable under their leases to a peppercorn, to regulate charges and costs payable by residential tenants, to regulate residential estate management and to regulate rent charges.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 13) with explanatory notes (Bill 13-EN).

Ways and Means

Autumn Statement Resolutions

4.42 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before we resume the debate, I remind hon. Members that, as Mr Speaker said last week, in addition to being present at the start of the debate, after a Member has spoken in the debate, they must, as an absolute minimum, remain in the Chamber for at least the next two speeches, and preferably for the majority of the debate. It is unfortunate that I am having to repeat this, but we have had some difficulties in recent weeks where Members think they can come in, make a speech and go away again. Taking part in a debate means being here for the whole of that debate. Of course, the occupant of the Chair will allow a Member to go out for a short while, but not for hours and hours.

It is also essential that every Member who has spoken in a debate should return to hear the winding-up speeches from both the Opposition spokespersons and the Minister. I remind hon. Members that that sometimes includes the spokesperson for the Scottish National party. If, for any reason, hon. Members are unable to return to the Chamber for the wind-ups in today's debate, for which approximately 46 people have indicated that they wish to catch my eye, they should please let me know now and I will withdraw their request to speak. I remind Members that records are kept when Members speak and fail to return, and that is taken into account when deciding whether to call Members in subsequent debates.

It should not be necessary to say this, but I have to say it: both the Minister and the Opposition spokespersons responding to the debate are expected to remain in the Chamber for the majority of the debate, so that they are able to respond effectively to points raised by other hon. Members.

I should draw the House's attention to a minor correction that has been made to resolution 21. A revised version of the resolutions paper is available in the Vote Office and online. It includes a note setting out the correction that has been made.

RATES OF TOBACCO PRODUCTS DUTY

Debate resumed (Order, 23 November).

Question again proposed,

That—

(1) In Schedule 1 to the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979 (table of rates of tobacco products duty), for the Table substitute—

“TABLE

	An amount equal to the higher of —
	(a) 16.5% of the retail price plus £316.70 per thousand cigarettes, or
Cigarettes	(b) £422.80 per thousand cigarettes.
Cigars	£395.03 per kilogram
Hand-rolling tobacco	£412.32 per kilogram
Other smoking tobacco and chewing tobacco	£173.68 per kilogram
Tobacco for heating	£325.53 per kilogram”.

(2) In consequence of the provision made by paragraph (1), in Schedule 2 to the Travellers' Allowances Order 1994 (which provides in certain circumstances for a simplified calculation of excise duty on goods brought into Great Britain) —

- (a) in the entry relating to cigarettes, for “£393.45” substitute “£422.80”,
- (b) in the entry relating to hand rolling tobacco, for “£351.03” substitute “£412.32”,
- (c) in the entry relating to other smoking tobacco and chewing tobacco, for “£161.62” substitute “£173.68”,
- (d) in the entry relating to cigars, for “£367.61” substitute “£395.03”,
- (e) in the entry relating to cigarillos, for “£367.61” substitute “£395.03”, and
- (f) in the entry relating to tobacco for heating, for “£90.88” substitute “£97.66”.

(3) The amendments made by this Resolution come into force at 6pm on 22 November 2023.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

4.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): Securing good jobs for more people is the best way out of poverty, and the best route to raising living standards. That is why, in his autumn statement, the Chancellor announced a cut in the main rate of employee national insurance from 12% to 10%. That is why we have raised the national living wage, representing a boost of more than £1,800 to the annual earnings of a full-time worker. That is why we are delivering the next generation of welfare reforms to help thousands more people into work. That is why, Madam Deputy Speaker, we on the Conservative Benches will never tire of reminding Opposition Members of our record since 2010: nearly 4 million more people in work; numbers on company payrolls at a near-record high; the unemployment rate around halved; more than a million fewer people in poverty; and UK economic inactivity lower than the G7, the EU and the OECD average, and down nearly 300,000 from its pandemic peak.

As Conservatives, we believe in making sure that those who can work have every opportunity to do so. Indeed, that is precisely how we can afford a strong welfare safety net for those who are unable to work and support for the most vulnerable in our society.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If we were to insist on work visas being given only to people who are on average UK earnings, would that not create a virtuous circle by which only skilled people came here, and care homes would be forced to pay proper wages, ensuring that more people came off my right hon. Friend's books and got into productive work?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is attempting to tempt me into matters that I know are under discussion at the highest levels of Government at the moment around the policy that we should adopt on immigration, but I will not be drawn immediately in that direction.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Let me return to the record of the past 13 years. At various points in that time, there has been no shortage of people in this House and outside who have been very quick to predict

[Stephen Crabb]

an explosion in unemployment—whether that was when we were introducing the public spending restraint under the coalition Government or when we were coming out of the covid pandemic. Does not the fact that those predictions were wrong demonstrate two things? The first is the underlying resilience of the British economy and labour market, and the second is the success of the measures taken by numerous Ministers in his Department over the years always to make work pay and to make sure that our welfare system is reformed to encourage work incentives?

Mel Stride: As usual, my right hon. Friend makes characteristically insightful remarks about the UK economy, not least about unemployment, where he is right: the expectation during covid was that unemployment would rocket up to the kind of levels that we last saw in the 1980s. The fact that no such thing happened is a testament to many of the Ministers, as my right hon. Friend suggests, and not least to our current Prime Minister, who as Chancellor came forward with the furlough scheme and the support for business.

Our commitment to supporting the most vulnerable is clear, including in the substantial the Government have provided to help families with the cost of living. That includes the millions of cost of living payments, landing directly into the bank accounts of those on the lowest incomes, as well as to millions of pensioners and disabled people. Of course, one of the most important actions that we have taken to help families is to deliver on the Prime Minister's pledge to halve inflation. A compassionate Government recognise that, for the poorest families, cost of living pressures remain, which is why we are increasing universal credit and other benefits by 6.7% from next April in line with September's inflation figure.

A compassionate Government recognise that rising rents are affecting private renters on the lowest incomes, which is why we are increasing the local housing allowance to the 30th percentile of local market rents from April next year. A compassionate Government back their pensioners, which is why we are honouring the triple lock, with an increase to the full state pension of 8.5%. That is the second biggest ever increase, following last year's increase of 10.1%.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State comment on the number of deaths that are anticipated, as I mentioned last week, due to elements of the policy proposals around forcing people into work, and taking their benefits off them if they are unable to fulfil that?

Mel Stride: I will come to benefit reform momentarily, but let me assure the hon. Lady—I know that this is a particular concern of hers, and she is right to be concerned about these matters—that my Department is extremely concerned to ensure that all changes in our benefit reforms are proportionate and are introduced in the most sympathetic and supportive way possible. Underlying those reforms, however, is a simple belief: we believe that where people want to work—where they have the ability to work—work is good for them. We want to open our door to as many people as possible, including many who are currently long-term sick and disabled, to give them exactly that opportunity.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have declared my business interests in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Noting the good words from the Chancellor in favour of self-employment, and noting the national insurance measures to help, are there things that the Department for Work and Pensions is doing, or can do, so that self-employment is an option for people who are currently without work but who may have a lot to offer?

Mel Stride: My right hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the self-employed and to the national insurance changes that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in his autumn statement. Of course, my Department does a huge amount to support the self-employed. Many of our programmes are open to self-employed people to ensure that we are there to support them with the wages that they are able to bring home in self-employment, and we will continue to do exactly that.

A compassionate Government also need to be honest about the significant challenge that we face with the rising number of people leaving the labour market due to ill health or disability. Around 2.6 million people are currently off work with a long-term physical or, increasingly, mental health condition. Given the positive impact that work has, not just on finances but on health and wellbeing, there is a clear need to do more to help and encourage those people. In a tight labour market, with employers looking to fill nearly 1 million vacancies, there is also a wider economic imperative. Every time someone returns to work, they benefit and everyone benefits. It helps the economy to grow, debt to fall and inflation to decline still further.

Just as importantly, given the waste of human potential that inactivity often represents, there is a moral case to act. That is why, with the £2.5 billion-worth of investment over the next five years, our back to work plan will help thousands of disabled people and those with health conditions to stay in work, or if they fall out of it, to move quickly back with the right support. A key part of our approach is bringing together employment and health support, because we know that work and health go hand in hand.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that Access to Work schemes will be readily available, funded and put in place much more quickly than they are now?

Mel Stride: The Access to Work scheme is a fantastic scheme for encouraging those with disabilities to go into work. It is one of the reasons why disability employment is an area in which we have had so much success. In 2017, we set a 10-year target of getting 1 million more disabled people into work. We exceeded that target by 40% in just five years. Access to Work is part of that. The funding for Access to Work, as the hon. Lady will know, can exceed £60,000. It is an enormous commitment by a caring and compassionate Government to ensure that those who may need the assistance actually receive it.

That approach is at the heart of our new WorkWell service, which is integrating employment and health support at the local level. We will reform the fit note process to ensure that it is not a simple pass to sickness absence, but more of a prescription for the right support that is needed to keep someone close to work or to

resume work after a period of illness. We are also doubling the number of placements available on our universal support programme, to help 100,000 people each year into roles, with up to 12 months of ongoing wraparound support to help ensure that they stay in work.

Lia Nici (Great Grimsby) (Con): I applaud my right hon. Friend and the Chancellor for bringing in all these new initiatives to make people get back to work. Grimsby has a higher unemployment rate than the national average, although it is coming down. Will he or one of his Ministers commit to meeting me to talk about what we can do to encourage more employers to become disability confident and to offer work placements to those people who are currently out of work, but are capable of getting back in to work?

Mel Stride: I know my hon. Friend is a very powerful champion for employment in her Great Grimsby constituency and I will indeed make sure that a Minister is available for the discussions she has sought.

Given that we know how important high-quality occupational health is for helping people with health conditions to stay in work, we will support businesses to develop voluntary minimum levels of intervention that employers can adopt to help to improve employee health.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is also introducing measures to reinforce our efforts to join up employment and health support by tackling one of the main reasons for sickness absence. Our expansion of access to mental health services will support almost 400,000 extra people through NHS talking therapies, and an additional 100,000 places will be made available through individual placement and support to help people who experience severe mental health conditions to start and stay in employment. With that significant expansion of extra support, we are breaking down the barriers that for too many have been a roadblock to the rewards of work. That requires bold reform.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mel Stride: While the world of work has transformed significantly in recent years, the way we assess someone's ability to work, or to prepare for work, has not changed for over a decade—not since the work capability assessment was last comprehensively reviewed in 2011. Since then, we have seen the rise of flexible working and new legislation giving workers the right to request it from day one of a new job. We have seen big increases in hybrid and home working, and there is a much greater understanding on the part of employers of the importance of reasonable adjustments and how to support disabled people in the workplace.

Stella Creasy: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mel Stride: Those changes have opened many more opportunities for disabled people and those with health conditions to participate in work, and for employers to benefit from their talents, but the fact is that too many people who could work are being denied access to those opportunities because they are deemed not fit to work or even to prepare for work. The proportion of people

going through a work capability assessment and receiving the highest level of health-related benefits, where there is no requirement to look or prepare for work, rose from 21% in 2011 to 65% in 2022.

However, crucially, one in five in that group would like to work in the future with the right support, and more than half of those who felt that they could work within the next two years saw a fear of not being able to return to benefits as a barrier to work. With our new chance to work guarantee, we are removing that barrier and that fear for millions of disabled claimants who want to try work.

The reform will effectively abolish the work capability assessment for the vast majority of existing claimants who have already been assessed and do not have any work-related requirements. They will be free to do some work without the prospect of having to be reassessed and potentially losing their benefits if a job does not work out. It brings forward a major part of our longer-term plan, set out in the health and disability White Paper published earlier in the year, which will see the work capability assessment abolished completely.

In the meantime, for new claimants, we are ensuring that the work capability assessment is fit for the modern world of work and reflects the greater opportunities for disabled people. To that end, we are updating some of the criteria we use to assess whether someone can work or prepare for work, including the “mobilising” and “getting about” activities, as well as the substantial risk rules. Those reforms will come in from 2025, and it is important to emphasise that we will continue to protect the most vulnerable and those with the most significant limitations.

Stella Creasy: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mel Stride: The changes will help many more people who can work—who want to work—to gain all the benefits of a job. That is my mission. It is a mission that extends to helping anyone who falls out of work, for whatever reason, to get back into work quickly. It is a mission to ensure that a spell out of work does not turn into the scourge of long-term unemployment, because we know that the longer someone remains out of work, the harder it is for them to return. That is why we are ensuring that people who are deemed fit to look for work are put on a stronger path to employment, rather than being parked on benefits indefinitely.

Stella Creasy: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Mel Stride: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Stella Creasy: Another scheme intended to help ensure that people can get back into work is the expansion of childcare. Last week's report showed us that the Office for Budget Responsibility believes that the Government's childcare reform will mean a reduction in welfare spending, and that the £5.2 billion pledged to childcare will need to be only £4.6 billion—a reduction of more than 10% in the funding available for childcare. We all agree that childcare will help people back into work, so will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to pledge on the record that the Government will put directly into childcare the full £5.2 billion that our constituents were promised in March?

Mel Stride: I was expecting a devastating, killer intervention, given how keen the hon. Lady was to intervene, but it never quite arrived. She will know that in the Budget, the Chancellor made a substantial investment—the hon. Lady mentioned the figure £5 billion—in childcare. In my Department that is huge, because it means that we will deal with the retrospective nature of the first month's payment, and that the amount available to those wishing to take advantage of childcare will be increased by some 49%.

Through our back to work plan, we are phasing in more intensive support and more rigorous requirements on jobseekers much earlier in their claim. We are accelerating the point at which claimants are required to undergo a more intensive 12-month work-search regime, which will kick in six months, rather than nine months, after the start of a claim. Anyone who has not moved into work by the end of that will be required to accept a mandatory work placement or other intensive activity to improve their chances of employment.

For those who refuse that support, it is right that there should be consequences. If a claimant does not accept those new conditions without good reason, their universal credit claim will be closed. As a result, no claimant should reach 18 months of unemployment in receipt of their full benefits if they have not taken every reasonable step to comply with jobcentre support. We will back that up with closer monitoring to ensure that the rules are being followed, including by tracking claimants' attendance at jobs fairs and at interviews organised by jobcentres. That will mean that work coaches have the information that they need to know whether claimants are meeting their commitments. As part of this more rigorous approach, we will continue looking at the impact of more intensive support at seven weeks into a claim being delivered through our additional jobcentre support.

These back to work reforms strike at the heart of the quid pro quo that defines the contract between the state and individual. We are saying, "The Government will provide you with the support you need to move into work, but if you fail to keep your side of the bargain—if you refuse to engage or ignore available job opportunities—we will stop your benefits."

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I do not think that many people will object to the idea that those who can work should work, and that the Secretary of State's measures to get people who are capable back into work should be adopted. However, he will be aware that the Work and Pensions Committee has recently been considering vulnerable people who are entitled to benefits but do not get them. What safeguards can he provide to guarantee that the health of people who are ill is not made worse by the pressure that some jobcentres will apply in trying to meet his targets?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. I have great respect for him, and I have appeared before the Select Committee and been cross-examined by him. He is right to raise those kinds of concerns. They are concerns that we think about on a daily basis in my Department, to make sure that we get it right.

The regime I am outlining is for people who have been intensively supported for 18 months during their job search, who are fit and able—so they are not the

people the hon. Gentleman described—and who, when presented at that point with the opportunity for work, decline that work. I think most people up and down the country would feel that it is right that there are consequences at that point.

When it comes to those who cannot work—those who are long-term sick or have significant disabilities—I want more than anybody else, and as much as any other person in this House, whichever side they may be on, to make sure that, as a civilised society, we are there to support them, no questions asked. But we can only do that for the most vulnerable in our society if we have a fair system that carries the support of the general public and can fund itself in the way we need it to.

Our back to work plan is about putting fairness at the heart of our welfare system: fairness for claimants who play by the rules and try their best, and fairness for taxpayers who contribute to the system. Contrast that with the Opposition, who have no plan. The only serious proposal they have for welfare reform is to water down benefit claimants' requirements to work, which could cost £2 billion. That is not just reckless but unfair. It is no wonder that Labour has never left office with unemployment lower than when it entered it. It is no wonder that under Labour, youth unemployment rose by over 40%, unemployment increased by over 1 million, and more than 1 million people were left to languish on out-of-work benefits for almost a decade. That was not a record in office; it was a national disgrace. On Labour's watch, countless lives were left to ruin.

The puddle of nihilism that is the Opposition Front Bench has no plan. Labour Front Benchers carp and vacillate from the sidelines, suck their teeth and dither, transfixed on the one hand by the fairer approach that they know in their heart the public demand, but frightened stiff on the other hand by the rank and file behind them. Is the truth not rather simple, Mr Deputy Speaker? They have no plan because compassion demands courage, and by their omissions they tell us that they have neither. This autumn statement protects the poorest and most in need, rewards work by cutting taxes and increasing pay, and takes the long-term decisions on welfare reform by helping people into work, growing the economy and changing lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.8 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): My constituent David has a 30-year-old son with autism and severe obsessive compulsive disorder. David says that despite all the challenges his son faces, he has recently moved into independent living and is working really hard to try to find a job. David's son has lots of skills, especially in computing and research, but because of his autism and, particularly, his OCD, he needs an employer who understands his conditions and will give him a real chance and offer him the work flexibility that someone in his situation needs. He is doing everything he possibly can to find work. He recently applied for a job at Tesco and was really pleased to get an interview, but because the job required a lot of overtime and there are limits on how many hours he can take because he is on employment and support allowance, he could not take up the offer.

This is the reality facing many sick and disabled people across Britain today. They want to work not just for the money, but for the sense of purpose, dignity, independence and self-respect that work brings. They deserve a Government who back their efforts and aspirations and who will tear down the barriers to their success, but under this Government nothing could be further from the truth.

The last few weeks have seen the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Work and Pensions Secretary railing against the soaring numbers of people out of work due to long-term sickness. It is as if, after 13 long years, this has nothing to do with them, but these problems have happened on their watch and they only have themselves to blame. Britain remains the only country in the G7 where the employment rate still has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and 2.6 million people are now shut out of work due to long-term sickness, which is the highest number since records began. What do the Government expect when they have driven the NHS into the ground and let waiting lists soar to 7.8 million, and when social care has been forced to its knees?

And what is the result? There are more and more people over 50 out of work due to long-term sickness, with people struggling with bad hips, knees and joints left stranded on NHS waiting lists and waiting for treatment in discomfort and pain. Many of them are women who are trying to care for their elderly parents or other sick and disabled relatives at the same time, with precious little help from an unreformed social care system after 13 years of this Government.

The number of young people out of work due to long-term sickness has doubled over the last decade and now stands at more than 230,000. Much of that is driven by mental health problems, but it is compounded if such a young person lacks basic qualifications and lives in a part of the country—often a town or coastal area outside our large cities—that is struggling economically.

We know from brutal experience the terrible consequences that long-term youth unemployment brings, and all these problems are far worse in poorer parts of the country. The grim reality is that someone is twice as likely to be out of work due to ill health if they live in the most deprived fifth of areas in England than if they live in the least deprived fifth, with rates of worklessness due to long-term sickness among the over-50s rising three times faster in the north of England than in the south.

This is the reality of Conservative Britain, and it is such an unforgivable waste. It is a waste of individual talent and potential when millions of people who want to work are written off because they cannot get the support they need to get back on their feet. It is a waste for British businesses, which desperately need to recruit staff and use the skills and experience of everyone in our country to thrive and succeed. It is an appalling waste of taxpayers' money too, with taxpayers paying an extra £15.7 billion a year in higher benefit bills and lost tax revenues compared with before the pandemic.

What are Ministers proposing to deal with a problem so serious that the OBR says it is a significant risk to fiscal sustainability, driving higher taxes and weakening our growth prospects? We heard a lot last week about how more sick and disabled people can work from home. Let us put to one side that, barely 18 months ago, the last Prime Minister but one, the then right hon.

Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, said that working from home does not work, and the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg) claimed that homeworking reduced productivity and led to higher taxes. I am a strong supporter of home and hybrid working but the reality is that by far the highest levels of homeworking are among people earning £50,000 a year or more. Two thirds of people who work from home have a university degree, compared with only around one in 10 of those with no qualifications. Did we hear anything from the Government about getting sick and disabled people the degrees and professional qualifications they need to secure these high-paid work-from-home jobs, or about how to get the internet access, computers, home adaptation aids and other support that they need, given that so many disabled people are living in poverty? We did not.

Instead, as I am afraid the Secretary of State repeated today, we heard a rehash of old plans that would not be needed if they had worked in the first place, and of measures so inadequate, unambitious and ineffective that they will fail to tackle the root causes of worklessness and get Britain working again.

The much-lauded reforms to fit notes and the new “expert group” on occupational health to drive improvements in employee health at work were both announced six years ago, in the “Improving lives” strategy that the Chancellor published when he was Health Secretary back in 2017. The new mandatory work placements were first announced back in 2011, when the Government said jobseekers who need initial support to get back to work can be referred on to mandatory four-week work placements. I am all in favour of work placements and better occupational health, which I have campaigned for in my constituency for years, but reannouncing old programmes that clearly have not worked is not a plan for success.

As for the Government's changes to the work capability assessment, Labour has been warning for years that benefit assessments are not fit for purpose and should be replaced with a simpler, clearer system that gets decisions right the first time and focuses on what people can do, not just what they cannot, as part of much wider reforms that give practical help and support to get people into work and to stay in work. But that is not what the Government are proposing and their plans are not a recipe for success.

That is not just my assessment, or the assessment of disabled people's organisations and charities; it is what the Office for Budget Responsibility says in its response to the autumn statement. A reasonable person might think that the results of a successful back to work plan would probably start with fewer people out of work due to long-term sickness and disability, but that is not what the Government's plans achieve: the OBR says that 600,000 more people will be on sickness and disability benefits after the Government's plans. Might we expect a higher overall employment rate? Sorry, wrong again: the OBR forecasts that this will remain static at just 60.6%. What about lower spending on sickness and disability benefits overall? I am afraid we would be wrong again; the OBR says that spending on sickness and disability benefits will increase by a staggering £33 billion over the forecast period—that is up by a whopping 75%. That is the result of the Government's plans.

[Liz Kendall]

Britain desperately needs an alternative plan to get Britain working again, and that is what Labour will deliver. Our top priority will be ensuring that everyone who can work, does, because rights to taxpayer support must go hand in hand with the responsibility to take up work and training when they are offered. Conditions have always been part of the social security system since the original Beveridge report, and under Labour that will always remain the case. But Beveridge also said that the state has a responsibility to do everything within its power to help people get back on their feet, including through an NHS that focuses as much on prevention and rehabilitation as on cure, and an economy that delivers full and productive employment across the country. That is why Labour's fully costed, fully funded plan will tackle the root causes of worklessness, drive down NHS waiting lists, overhaul jobcentres, transform skills, reform social security and make work pay.

That starts with our long-term plan for the NHS, because we know that a healthy nation is the key to a healthy economy. We will invest an extra £1.1 billion a year, paid for by abolishing the non-dom tax status, to provide 2 million more NHS appointments and clear the NHS backlog. We will recruit 8,500 more mental health staff, with support in every school and in every community to tackle mental health problems early on, paid for by closing private equity bonus loopholes, because when half of all serious mental illness starts before the age of 18, we have to get that help and support early on.

We will go further still. We will overhaul jobcentres, so that they provide personalised help tailored to individual needs—not the one-size-fits-all approach that drives too much of what the Government do. Jobcentres will also have new duties to work in partnership with the local NHS, employers and others. There will be a new focus on helping people to progress out of low pay, because we do not just want people to get a job; we want them to get on in their job and to use their talents and skills to the full. That is crucial to improving productivity and putting money in people's pockets.

Mel Stride *rose*—

Liz Kendall: I look forward to the Secretary of State's intervention.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady has substantially described our plan. What she has not said is whether she supports it. Does she support our plan?

Liz Kendall: I do not support a plan that leads to £33 billion more spending at the end of the forecast period and 600,000 more people on sickness and disability benefits because the Government have failed to tackle the root causes of worklessness or to put a proper plan in place. I know that the Secretary of State is desperate to say that people on the Opposition Benches do not support conditions or the requirement to work, but work is our party's name. We believe that the benefits of work go beyond a payslip to the dignity and self-respect that good work brings. We will devolve employment support, so that it works for local issues and local needs, because the man, or even woman, in Whitehall can never know what is best in Leicester, Liverpool or Leeds.

Instead of demonising disabled people, we will put in place a proper plan to ensure that those who can work, do. Our “into work guarantee”, backed by the Centre for Social Justice and the Social Security Advisory Committee, will provide real incentives for sick and disabled people, allowing them to try work without fear of losing their benefits if things go wrong. It seems that the Government have finally nicked our proposals, just as they did with our NHS workforce plan. I have no idea what took them so long. Unlike the Government, however, who have let waits for Access to Work support soar, we will drive those waits down so that people can get the adaptations, equipment, travel and other support when they need it, rather than having to wait for weeks on end.

That is not all. Our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity will overhaul skills, so that no one is ever written off, whatever their age, including with new technical excellence colleges and by reforming apprenticeships. We will make work pay with a real living wage and by banning zero-hours contracts and fire and rehire. We will help parents balance work and family life with breakfast clubs in every primary school and more rights to flexible working through our new deal for working people.

Above all, our driving mission in government that will drive everything we do will be getting growth across every part of our country, because that is the key to our future success. We will get Britain building again by overhauling planning with ambitious new housing targets and first dibs for first-time buyers. We will get Britain investing again, providing the long-term certainty and stability that businesses need, which have been so fatally undermined by this Government. With our national wealth fund, we will leverage private sector investment to create the jobs of the future and make Britain a clean energy superpower. We will get Britain innovating again with our modern industrial strategy and plans to make this country the best place to start up and grow a business.

This autumn statement, hot on the heels of the damp squib of a King's Speech, proved—if proof were ever necessary—that after 13 long years, the Government have run out of road and run out of ideas. Conservative voters, and even Conservative Members, could be forgiven for wondering what on earth their party is for. They say that they are the party of lower taxes, but the tax burden is the highest for 70 years, and working families are paying £4,000 a year more in taxes in this Parliament alone. They promised to take back control of our borders and stop the boats, but so far this year 27,000 people have arrived on small boats this year, their flagship Rwanda policy is in tatters, and, at 745,000, net migration is the highest recorded in history.

The Conservatives claim to be the party of home ownership, but home ownership has fallen under this Government, with couples now having to spend on average a decade saving for their first deposit, up from only three years under Margaret Thatcher. The armed forces have been cut and cut again, with the Army now employing a third fewer troops than it did in 2010, despite all the risks and threats that we face. Our criminal justice system is on its knees, with violent crime rising, court backlogs soaring and judges being told not to jail convicted criminals because the Tories have failed to build enough prisons. So much for being

the party of law and order. That is before we even consider the dire state of our public services, where our schools are literally crumbling, patients are left dying in ambulances, and local government is on its knees.

Britain deserves so much better than this. I know from talking to people across the country, from Hastings to Erewash and from Swindon to Selby, that they are desperate for change, but the Conservatives cannot be the change from 13 years of their own failure. Under the leadership of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), we have changed the Labour party, and we stand ready to change the country. Let us have a general election, and let us have it now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call John Redwood to speak, I inform the House that **I apologise that** I was absent at the beginning of today's sitting due to a change in flight times after spending the last 30 hours meeting my counterparts in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories following the devastating crisis in Israel and Gaza. I thank my counterparts for meeting me at this sad and difficult time.

My advice for Back Benchers is to take up to eight minutes. If we can try to work to that, we will get everybody in on the same basis.

5.27 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I have my business interests declared in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Underneath the exchanges of words, I welcome the outbreak of agreement, given that the Labour party now strongly supports the idea of helping more people into work. I suspect that the Opposition will not vote against the main items in the autumn statement because they understand that the Government have had success in keeping so many people in work and promoting employment over the years, despite some extremely difficult situations. They also understand that that is an important thing for a responsible Government to do, and not just to get the benefit bill down. As Labour has eloquently said, life can be so much more worth while when people have suitable work, suitably supported, that gives them a sense of purpose and of contributing to their communities.

I wish to draw brief attention to the issue of getting inflation under control and the inadequacy of forecasts by the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Bank of England. It is extremely difficult for Ministers to conduct consistent policy when the forecasts are zinging around so much and giving different and often misleading ideas of what is feasible and what is not. I welcome the other place's most recent report on the Bank of England, which highlights how the Bank has been unable to come up with realistic inflation reports over the last three years and has therefore taken inappropriate action. First, it loosened monetary policy in the covid recovery phase, and now its monetary policy is too tight as it seeks to adjust its past mistakes. I hope that the Bernanke review will get on with the important task of adjusting the Bank's models and coming up with a better answer to help guide our counsels, and particularly those of our Ministers.

I find it odd that we have a Monetary Policy Committee that is not interested in money and credit. As the other place's report suggests, perhaps it should look at putting money and credit into its thinking—more diversity of thought is recommended—and into the models to try to get them to work. What is the point of the committee sitting around trying to make decisions if the main data it is using—namely, what it thinks the inflation rate will be—can be massively out? It thought that the inflation rate would stay at a pretty consistent 2%, when it was en route to 11%. That was why, for many months, the Monetary Policy Committee did not take appropriate action to rein in potential inflation. Now it is pretty sure that inflation will come under control, but it still has had difficulties and is constantly having to change its inflation forecasts in the meantime, as has the OBR.

The review rightly points out that when looking at money and credit in the economy, we need to look at the experience elsewhere in the world. Of the five most important central banks of the world, including the Bank of England, those in Asia have lived through exactly the same big escalation in food and energy prices as a result of the dreadful war in Ukraine. The two major central bank economies in Asia are very vulnerable, because they import a lot of food and energy, but their inflation stayed around 2%, whereas the three western central banks, including the Bank of England, took much more aggressive monetary action, printing a lot of money and buying an awful lot of bonds, and experienced the inflation rate going up to around 10%. They should pause and ask why.

The review also rightly says that the Bank of England should be more accountable to Parliament—not to the Government, in any way to prejudice its independence—because it is in the process of losing us the most colossal sums of money. Successive Chancellors have guaranteed the Bank of England against all losses from their bond buying programmes, which started under Labour at the end of the first decade of the century and were escalated by the current Government in response to covid. We are now looking at a possible loss of £170 billion, based on the latest figures that it has revealed. Every penny of that has to be paid by the Treasury on behalf of taxpayers as and when it is incurred.

There is absolutely no need for the Bank of England to make those losses bigger and more immediate by wading into the markets at the moment and selling those bonds in a hurry, at very depressed prices—prices that the Bank has deliberately depressed in order to get interest rates higher. It could follow the European Central Bank, which wisely is not selling its bonds at a loss in the market but is awaiting their retirement when they fall due for repayment, when the losses will be less but it can still shrink the balance sheet, which is the main thing it wishes to do.

I hope the Government will look at that, because it has always been a dual-controlled policy: the bond buying required the signatures of successive Chancellors of the Exchequer. It is a matter of legitimate concern for this House when the losses are so colossal, and there is a direct impact on all public expenditure figures, public borrowing and so forth, excluding the Bank of England. As many in the debate will know, we look at the figures both *cum* the Bank the England and *ex* the Bank of England. The *ex* the Bank of England figures look very poor indeed.

[John Redwood]

I welcome measures in the autumn statement to promote more growth, which is crucial. The way to get inflation down faster is to promote more capacity, so any measure that gets us more capacity is welcome. That is why I am particularly keen that we be much kinder to the self-employed and small businesses. They can do more work immediately, but some of the tax penalties still weigh on them, preventing them from getting self-employed status or winning contracts, or preventing small businesses from growing quickly enough. I repeat my urging for Ministers to look at that: more capacity would be the best way to get inflation down.

I will put in one final plea to Ministers to find some money to cut the taxes on energy. They are making us extremely uncompetitive and are keeping inflation higher for longer. It would be a win-win to get some of the taxes on energy down.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

5.34 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Against a pretty horrendous economic backdrop, it was with bated breath and no little trepidation that we on the SNP Benches waited to see what the Chancellor would drop. The backdrop is certainly about as far removed as anyone could ever have hoped it would have been going into such a crucial period. Not only is GDP per capita still not above 2019 pre-pandemic levels, but the UK is expected to suffer the biggest fall in living standards since records began in the 1950s. Most people are expected to be worse off in 2027 than they were in 2019. Real incomes are also expected to be lower in 2027 than they were in 2019. A typical household will be worse off by approximately £694 per annum by 2027-28 as a result of the policies of this Conservative Government who are so adamant, in the face of all outcomes and facts, that they get the big decisions right. That is certainly not borne out by the outlook for the economy under their stewardship.

Sadly, there was nothing at all in the Chancellor's statement that offered any kind of meaningful change for the millions of people in Scotland and elsewhere who are really struggling right now against that economic backdrop. Last week's announcements were a clear reminder for people in Scotland, if any were needed, that we cannot hope to build a fair, dynamic economy while being tied to UK Governments who, through their actions, do not reflect the preferences, choices or values that people consistently express at the ballot box when they go to vote.

On the statement, there is the old proverb about the couple who stop for directions and are told, rather unhelpfully, "I wouldn't be starting from here." Let us not be in any doubt: we certainly would not wish to be starting from here. We would not wish to be labouring with the aftermath of Brexit, which has permanently given the UK economy the effect of trying to drive a car with the handbrake wedged firmly on. We certainly would not be coming off the back of the catastrophic Budget driven by the right hon. Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) and for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), which blew up the economy. Despite that, and in spite of everything, the Chancellor did have slightly

more headroom—about £20 billion—than had been forecast. The question was: how would he seek to put that to work?

I will start with the few positives I can find. The uplifting of benefits by 6.7% in line with the higher rate of inflation really is the least the Chancellor could have done. It will still leave too many people struggling and wondering how they are going to pay their bills. It was the very least that should have been done on uplifting the rate. Uplifting the local housing allowance was important. My party called for, and we welcome, allowing rates of housing benefit to be paid at rates that more closely match where the market actually is. A freeze in whisky duty certainly does not undo the damage of the spring Budget, where a 10.1% levy was whacked on the spirit, but at least it makes things no worse.

If the House will permit me, I would like to take the opportunity, while I have a captive audience on the Treasury Bench, to explain why whisky duty matters. The Scotch whisky industry supports 10,000 jobs in Scotland and 42,000 jobs across the whole of the UK. It also represents 25% of total UK food and drink exports. One would think that this is an industry that the Government would want to look after, nurture, take care of and give every possible opportunity to succeed. The level of duty affects domestic consumption and also affects the investment that goes into supporting those jobs. But here's the rub: it also impacts how other jurisdictions in key markets, particularly the Asian markets, react, because many of them take their cue from the level of duty set by the UK Government. If they see the UK Government setting a rate of duty where there is a gigantic differential between indigenous spirits such as Scotch whisky and other drinks in the market, then they have absolutely no qualms about following suit. That depresses potential sales in key emerging markets and reduces the opportunities we have to drive growth and innovation in that key sector at home.

As for the bigger picture, nothing in the Chancellor's statement offered meaningful change to the millions of people out there who are suffering at the moment. What the statement did offer was a clear reminder that, as I have said, the key powers over the commanding heights of the economy will do nothing for Scotland while they continue to remain under the control of Governments who do not share the values that people vote for. Sadly, as the soaring cost of household bills outpaces the limited help that was on offer in the statement, the reality is that what was offered is far too little, coming far too late for the squeezed majority of households.

The SNP set what I thought were some pretty basic fundamental tests for the statement: a relatively small number of asks that could nevertheless have made a big difference. We asked for a £400 energy rebate, something that the UK Government have sadly failed to provide although energy bills continue to be roughly double what they were in 2021—and moreover, the day after the statement the energy price cap was increased by a further 5%. We challenged the UK Government to match the council tax freeze by the SNP Government in Edinburgh, which will put a disproportionately high amount of money into the pockets of the lowest earners. We also challenged them to match the game-changing Scottish child payment of £25 a week, another measure that is putting thousands of pounds into the pockets of those who need it most. That payment was highlighted

in a recent blog by the London School of Economics as one of the key reasons why the level of child poverty in Scotland—although far too high—is still significantly lower than it is in any other part of the UK.

The UK Government could also have given some respite to hard-pressed homeowners, many of whom are looking down the barrel of significant increases in their mortgage payments as a result of higher interest rates. They could have done that by introducing mortgage interest rate relief, but they chose not to do so.

For my part of Scotland, the north-east, we challenged the UK Government to match what the Scottish Government are doing in kick-starting the energy revolution, the green transition that we need—to match the £500 million set aside purely for the north-east—but we got nothing, although we know how crucial that energy transition is to ensuring fairness, retaining human capital and prosperity, and delivering the changes that not only our economy but our planet needs.

We are invited to believe that the goal of the statement was growth. Let me draw attention to two key areas in which the UK Government have, in my view, been found to be badly wanting. The first is capital spending. There are obviously pressures to maintain existing assets, as we all know from the emergence of the problems that reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete has caused in many public sector buildings constructed over the past 40 years. We can see the waste caused by overspending: the horrendous waste of money represented by some of the stations in central London on the Elizabeth line, a railway that did go ahead, and by the cancellation of HS2 and the bits of that line that did not go ahead. However, we need to recognise the importance not just of private sector capital expenditure, but of the key driving, galvanising force that capital expenditure from the Government and the public sector can have. It drives and encourages investment from the private sector, and, crucially, it increases the productive capacity of each and every one of us. It is therefore unfathomable that the UK Government should cut the Scottish Government's capital budget by 6.7% between 2023-24 and 2027-28—a figure that will potentially become even higher if inflation persists at its current levels—all the while refusing to devolve long-term borrowing powers.

Secondly, there is a persistent negative when it comes to research and development. There are parts of the UK that punch pretty well above their weight in that regard, most obviously the south-east of England and London but also Scotland. However, there are other parts, such as the regions of England and also Wales, where R&D spending is significantly below the share of GDP, and also below the share of the population that might be expected to be able to attract it. Beyond that, the UK's investment in research and development consistently lags that of EU competitors such as France and Germany, which is a major drag on long-term growth and economic opportunities for all our constituents.

Looking through the additional spends and revenues forgone as a result of the statement, it seems to me—I am happy to be proved wrong—that the Government are committing more to returning full business rates to the combined authorities in Greater Manchester and the west midlands than they are to research and development or anything that might drive that forward. Lest anyone assail me, I have absolutely no grudge against the west midlands of England or the Greater

Manchester combined authority—more power to them! I do not know whether the Greater Manchester combined authority extends to Chorley, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: We are in Lancashire.

Richard Thomson: Perhaps some reflected benefit will come through. Those authorities are entitled to every penny that they can get back from this Government, and I wish them well in that endeavour, but it pales in comparison with the strategic importance of research and development, in policy terms and numerically. Until the Government get to grips with the long-term lack of investment in our public sector, our human capital, our physical capital and our R&D, we can expect the country to lag behind.

It is no secret that I come here as a supporter of Scottish independence. I would dearly love to see Governments in Scotland being able to make their own budgets, constrained only by the limits of their own resources, their own choices, their own imaginations and their own political mandates, and with restrictions placed on them by nowhere else. But until that day comes, we are stuck with what this Government and potential UK Governments come forward with, which, I have to say, we find badly wanting.

5.46 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): The House, on both sides, wants to get Britain growing, and that is a great statement of intent. I am delighted that the Opposition parties agree with the Government and the Conservative party on that. I hope they will also agree that it is important that people keep more of what they earn, because they have earned it, they deserve it and that is how we will create the right work incentives to grow the economy in the years ahead. I want to put on record my support for the changes to national insurance, which will be a really important step in delivering exactly that. The fact that 27 million people will be getting a tax cut and that someone employed on a wage of £35,000 will be £450 better off is an excellent step in the right direction, and I hope there will be more to come.

I also welcome the changes for the self-employed, because it is crucial that we focus not only on those employed in large businesses but on those who work for themselves. They are the strivers who get up every morning looking for new opportunities, not only for themselves but for their families and for our wider economy. It is also important for both groups, whether they are employed or self-employed, that there is fairness in the system, and that is why it is right that welfare is looked at again. It is important that this country has a safety net. Across the House, everyone agrees with that simple premise. Those who fall on hard times, those who find themselves in difficulties and those who have particular needs that mean they cannot work at a point in their life deserve our support, and I know that the country is with us on that. But those who do not seek work are the people that the Government are rightly looking at again. I know that the people out there who we work for, the people who pay taxes, are on the Government's side as we ensure that those who do not seek work are not provided with the support of generous taxpayers across this country.

[*Mr Ranil Jayawardena*]

I also give credit to the Government for the abolition of the lifetime allowance, which was announced earlier than the autumn statement. Again, this is an important statement of intent because it creates the right incentives for people to be able to work in this country. That includes people who want to work longer, given that our health is consistently better and that we can work well into what was traditionally seen as retirement. By seeking to reverse the change, the Labour party is wrong. It would price out—tax out—doctors, policemen and teachers from public service at their peak. Labour's plan to restore the lifetime allowance would cripple those who want to continue working and contributing to our economy and society, which is something that we should be welcoming; I certainly do.

I said that I hope this is a starting point and that the Government will go further—I believe it is crucial that they do. Although childcare is an important issue for many people in this country, family-friendly taxation is arguably more important. Many people choose to use informal forms of childcare, and many people want to spend more time with their children during their early years. Indeed, 74% of women polled say that they want to spend more time with their children, particularly before they start school, and two thirds want to spend all their time with their children before they start school, but they cannot because the support is not there in the tax system. That makes us an outlier—families are taxed about 26% more in this country than in our OECD counterparts. It is a question of fairness. Individuals pay less tax than the OECD average, but families pay more. I hope the Government will look at that in the months ahead. Indeed, I hope they will look at the excellent report from the Centre for Policy Studies, to which I happened to contribute, outlining some of the options.

The SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson), talked about the squeezed middle. It is crucial that tax thresholds—particularly the 40p threshold—are reviewed. It is wrong of the SNP to say that it is here in defence of the squeezed middle, when the squeezed middle are the ones being taxed the hardest north of the border.

We must go further, too, to prove that we are different from the SNP, and that we recognise that people who strive to progress in their career, who strive to earn more money, should be rewarded. I am led to believe that, had the 40p threshold remained index-linked from the time of Nigel Lawson, it would now be in the order of £80,000, so there is much further to go to make sure the threshold does not affect police sergeants, teachers with 10 years' experience and the like. That was not its intended purpose. Again, if we are keen to make work pay, and if we are keen to create the right incentives in our economy for people to try to secure more hours, to secure a promotion or to set up their own business, we need to make sure the tax system reflects that.

In addition, those who have done the right thing all their lives by saving hard and putting their hard-earned money into their family home should not be penalised. It is crucial that the Government look again at lifting the inheritance tax threshold from £325,000 to perhaps £1 million, as was proposed by the former Chancellor, George Osborne, in 2007. This would simply do what

the Conservative party says it has always wanted to do, and I hope the Front Bench will look at that in the months ahead.

I am conscious of time, so I will move on to spending reductions and capital receipts. When the Government cancelled High Speed 2, I wonder whether they considered privatising the operation, rather than selling off the land piecemeal. There is an opportunity here to build infrastructure for the future, but for the private sector to do it and for the Government to get a capital receipt now. I hope the Government would welcome that, because it is wrong to stymie infrastructure for the future, but it is right that taxpayers' money is best spent on road projects across this country.

There is a huge amount of spending across Government. One example is in the Department for Transport, where a huge amount of money is being spent on so-called active travel. This is the left getting what it wants, which is everyone moving from their own private transport into Government-controlled transport, or being forced to walk or cycle in 15-minute neighbourhoods. That is not what the people of this country want. They do not want blanket 20 mph speed limits, so those are the sorts of cuts we should seek.

Mr Speaker: We now come to a maiden speech. I call Sarah Edwards.

5.54 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I am grateful to be able to make my maiden speech in this debate on the autumn statement.

For many people, the primary concern is how they will get through to the end of the month. Pockets are empty, cupboards are bare and many are filled with despair. I must apologise, for I know a maiden speech should start with a more uplifting tone, but I would be remiss, in my place on these green Benches, if I forgot to be a voice for my constituents and simply glossed over the crisis in which they find themselves.

It is only right that I pay tribute to the many community organisations that have stitched together the supportive fabric that many now rely upon and the threads that hold it together, such as Heart of Tamworth, whose hub provides a solace from that despair, whether it be through the dementia café or the food pantry. Like a quilt, it always has a warm welcome.

The people of Tamworth and the villages voted for a prosperous future and for change, and it is to my constituents that I turn first. I thank them for placing their trust in me to restore their voice in this House. I am immensely proud to represent the great constituency of Tamworth, complete with its spectacular villages, and I will endeavour to champion the issues that matter to my constituents at every opportunity.

I am proud to be Tamworth's first female MP. Women have been able to stand for Parliament only since 1918. To date, just 563 female MPs—not even amounting to a full House—have been elected. That sets my recent by-election victory, with the second largest swing since 1945, in an even starker light, making me even prouder to have been elected against the odds. I draw a parallel with my predecessor Brian Jenkins who, also as a by-election candidate, was elected against the odds in 1996. I am grateful to him for his support during my campaign.

I was elected with the knowledge that Tamworth boasts a unique history, having been fortified in 913 with the building of Tamworth castle by Æthelflæd, the lady of the Mercians, whose leadership legacy left behind that stunning heritage asset adored by the town and visitors alike. Our sense of identity is rooted in the stories of the past, and the historic market town of Tamworth is proud of its medieval heritage. With my own passion for heritage, the honour of representing a place with so much tangible heritage is hard to articulate, but I intend to find creative ways to support the regeneration of Tamworth through its priceless heritage and, in particular, its high street, which so many people have told me needs regenerating. People like Sam, a female entrepreneur who runs Roasters, which has been a staple part of the high street for more than 30 years, ensuring that people can always get a hot pork sandwich, complete with the crackliest, crackly crackling they will ever crunch. Or women like Sarah, who runs Christopher's and provides the town with a gorgeous boutique hotel and restaurant. She kept the business going despite the turmoil that faced hospitality during the pandemic.

The Tamworth Co-operative Society is still an integral part of the town and has featured greatly in its development. Founded by philanthropist and social entrepreneur William MacGregor in 1886, it championed, above all else, fair prices and quality products for the poor and working classes, flying in the face of the profiteering shopkeepers of the time.

As a parliamentarian, it is also important to be humble and not to brag about my constituency, so I will refrain from telling the House that we are also home to the Tamworth Tap, which this year was named by the Campaign for Real Ale as the country's best pub.

But a high street cannot flourish without people visiting and feeling safe. Concern about antisocial behaviour and a desire to have a closer relationship with local police has made my constituents feel that their town centre needs more visible policing. It is for this reason that I would like to pay tribute to my predecessor Sir Robert Peel, the distinguished parliamentarian and first leader of the Conservative party, who was known for his commitment to his country first and his party second. He was a visionary who sought to improve the social system that supported communities, establishing the Metropolitan police on the principles of policing by consent and its place within the community. The well-known principle that the police are the public and the public are the police is still, to this day, what makes policing in this country stand apart from that in many others.

It is therefore all the more troubling that Tamworth no longer has a police station with a front desk or custody cells, and my constituents have raised with me their concerns over antisocial behaviour and safety within their communities. Policing should have a community focus and should be accessible; it should give people the sense that the police reflect them and their needs. That is why I campaign to have a front desk reopened in Tamworth and for the re-establishment of community policing.

The communities I serve include incredible villages such as Elford, Edingale, Whittington, Drayton Bassett and Shenstone, whose community library boasts an incredible programme of activities and a rather fancy coffee machine that is such a repeat draw that it has almost single-handedly stamped out late returns.

Colleagues will know that I am a devoted dog owner and, as a former Crufts competitor, I have set my sights on the much-coveted, highest political accolade: Westminster dog of the year. Tamworth is a proud dog owning constituency, and I met many along the campaign trail, including little Reggie the lost Pomeranian. Estimates by campaign colleagues who were out door knocking put Tamworth dog ownership at approximately 100%, although I am sure the House of Commons Library would rightly disagree with such a loose application of anecdotal evidence.

In conclusion, Tamworth has a rich, strong history, and my constituents are rightly proud of it. However, reflecting on the current cost of living crisis and the desire for the opportunity to live a life less burdened, they rightly want where they live, and the community they are part of, to thrive. The people of Tamworth voted for a fresh start and a positive vision for their town and villages. During the campaign, they were clear in setting out their priorities for change, and having spent over a decade giving working people a voice in the workplace, I intend to be their voice and champion in the constituency and here at Westminster. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

6.1 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Let me welcome you back from your important visit, Mr Speaker, and begin by welcoming the maiden speech from the hon. Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards). She will find this to be quite a robust, feisty place, where perhaps courtesy is not what it should be, but we should commend an exemplary maiden speech and wish her all the best in her parliamentary career.

I am grateful to catch your eye, Mr Speaker, for this important opportunity to comment on the Chancellor's autumn statement, the Government's update on the health of the nation's finances. Members in all parts of the House have recognised that the backdrop to any discussion about our economy would not be complete without recognising the unprecedented, seismic events that have impacted the nation's finances over the past few years: covid and the Ukraine conflict. Those once-in-a-generation events would have tested any Government, whoever was in power, as indeed they have tested Governments across Europe and beyond. Looking at how we compare with other nations puts the challenges we have experienced in perspective. In 2022, all but one of the G7 nations experienced higher debt-to-GDP ratios than the UK, so we have stabilised the nation's finances.

It is time to move forward and grow our economy. It is time to take advantage of the welcome fiscal headroom to increase UK productivity; to continue to tackle the cost of living crisis by helping more people back into work; and to map out a clear economic vision for the future. I am sure that reducing national insurance, increasing benefit payments, along with the national minimum wage, and advancing the state pension are changes that will be welcomed, not just by the public but by Labour.

I say to the Minister that I was hoping for more support for the tourism and hospitality industry. The value of tourism to Britain is too often overlooked. It is worth £140 billion to our economy, it accounts for 6% of our GDP and 11% of our workforce are employed

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

in this important sector. I welcome the continued extension of the 75% rate relief for hospitality, but I would like us to go further, with a permanent reduction in VAT for tourism. We saw that briefly during the covid crisis. I know that the discussion is taking place and perhaps—please—we will see that measure come out of the hat in next year's spring statement. Tourism is vital to our economy and to Bournemouth, so reducing VAT in the tourism and hospitality sector is something I hope Ministers will consider.

John Redwood: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the problem is that the OBR's forecasting never gives any credit for cutting a tax rate in order to get more revenue? This could be a good example of where that would work.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Centre for Economics and Business Research suggests that there is £10 billion to be made in lost GDP at the moment, as we are not attracting overseas visitors because our taxes are higher than those of our continental counterparts.

Looking at the bigger picture, finances certainly remain tight. The national debt, although falling as a percentage of GDP, as I said, remains too high. Our growth, although larger than Germany's, is not where it should be. Given that we are the sixth largest economy in the world, we need to look at improving productivity, which remains sluggish, as it has been since 2008. A lot of these economic debates focus, understandably, on the micro level—the line-by-line budget allocations to Whitehall Departments, and the changes to general taxation, benefits and pensions—but how all those fiscal jigsaw pieces fit together is often overlooked. Our world is changing fast. Not only is it becoming more internationally competitive, but there is a question mark as to what our role actually is. I am reminded of what John Foster Dulles, the former US Secretary of State, said:

“Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role.”

What we saw in the autumn statement was interesting indeed. The world is going digital, as IT changes every aspect of our lives: how we communicate, travel, do business and even strengthen our own security. That is all good news for the UK, as we have the third largest tech sector in the world, after the US and China. We are world leaders in pharmaceuticals, life sciences, creative industries, aerospace, fintech and artificial intelligence. With some of the best universities in the world, along with our globally recognised finance sector, we are well placed to become a high-tech superpower—another silicon valley. That is also good news for Bournemouth, because that is exactly where our area focuses; we are focused not just on tourism and financial services, but on the creative industries.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for what he says about the pharmaceutical and engineering sectors, as we have businesses in those areas in my constituency that can do well. One thing that is needed to improve it is reviewing and increasing the child benefit thresholds—perhaps the Government should consider that. It would enable families that work hard to get more benefit, which they cannot do at this moment in time.

Mr Ellwood: In the spirit of brevity, let me just say that I 100% agree with the hon. Gentleman on that.

I began by mentioning the global shocks of covid and Ukraine, and placing them in context. There is clearly a direct correlation between our economy and our security. About half of our GDP is affected by international headwinds. For those of us who follow international events, it is clear that there will be more covid and more Ukraine-sized conflicts. Our world is becoming more dangerous, not less. These threats are growing and becoming more complex and dynamic. There is an increasing blurring, with the scale of direct military threats being matched by those in the economy and, specifically, in the digital space. With authoritarianism on the rise, we have entered an ever-uncertain era of insecurity, akin to the 1930s, with rising populism, new and dangerous alliances forming, increased threats to our international rules-based order and our international institutions unable to hold errant nations to account. This is all causing a number of alarm bells to ring on the global order dashboard. Arguably, the situation is even more grave than the one in the 1930s, because we also face climate change, cyber threats and the pervasive role of the non-state actor in that equation.

So I end by simply calling for greater investment, including in security and defence. Such calls may fall on deaf ears, because of all the domestic challenges we face, but I simply say: look at how our fragile stability is fragmenting; we must be better prepared for the global shocks that our economy will face in the longer term. We are rekindling our statecraft skills, but please may we see an increase in defence spending in the spring Budget?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I have looked at the clock and at the number of speakers, and after the next speaker I will impose a seven-minute time limit on speeches.

6.9 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate my new hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) and I wish her well, but she arrives in difficult times, because in 30 years as an MP, I have never seen the country's finances in such a mess. We have the highest taxes since records began, the highest public sector debt since the 1960s and inflation at a 41-year high, and average households will be £1,900 worse off by the end of this Government.

At the same time, public services are on their knees and the OBR predicts a miserable 0.1% growth rate for the fourth quarter. The Government try to pile the blame on others—covid, Ukraine, the middle east and even their own past leaders—but the whole Conservative Government have done this, having voted through 13 years of flawed measures and disastrous policies that have not helped growth and jobs, but have intensified inequality and increased child poverty. We have had enough, the country has had enough and Britain deserves better.

I will focus on three areas that could make a real difference if the Government made different choices. In 2012, the tax gap—the gap between what HMRC receives and what taxpayers pay—was £34 billion. This year, it is up by nearly £2 billion, and if tax campaigners calculated it, they would probably triple or quadruple that figure.

Failing to collect £36 billion is massive—that is £3 billion more than we spend on the whole of primary education across the UK.

Those who benefit most from HMRC's failure to pursue them are the rich. Last year, only 11 wealthy individuals were prosecuted for tax cheating and only eight were pursued for evasion over two years. However, 420,000 people on low incomes, many not earning enough to pay a penny in tax, were taken to court for filing their tax returns too late.

What about the big multinationals who still aggressively avoid tax? TaxWatch's analysis of just eight tech companies, including Google, Facebook and Apple, shows UK profits of £9.6 billion, but the tax paid amounted to a miserly £297 million. They avoided £1.5 billion in UK tax. Add the estimated £350 billion annual loss through fraud and money laundering, and we are talking about eye-watering sums, yet prosecutions and convictions by HMRC have both fallen by 75% in the last five years. This wretched failure to pursue tax avoiders, evaders, fraudsters, money launderers and multinationals is a scandalous stain on this Government and destroys faith in our system.

Equally awful is the fact that the Government cannot be trusted to spend our money wisely. Government waste is yet another scandalous stain on the Conservative Government's record: £15 billion lost to fraud and error across all covid schemes, £1 billion overspent on a contract for a new warhead facility, another billion pounds lost on the Astute nuclear-powered submarines and £2.2 billion wasted on the now abandoned HS2 phase 2 project. The bill for the failed asylum support system has gone up fivefold in four years and cost us a shocking £3.6 billion. The staggering costs of meeting the needs of nearly 300,000 homeless families are at least £18 billion a year. With services so stretched, the waste of taxpayers' money because of sheer incompetence is unforgivable. People are struggling while the Government squander.

I want to turn to the unfairness in the tax system that the Government deliberately promote. Our system is ridiculously complex, opening opportunities for aggressive tax avoidance. Take the 1,180 tax reliefs, of which 339 are non-structural reliefs, supposedly introduced to help a particular group achieve a particular policy outcome. We have no idea how much those tax reliefs cost or whether they are effective, and there is no accountability for the expenditure, because it is all below the line. One hundred reliefs have been costed, at an estimated £195 billion, which is almost double what we spend on local government and double the £46 billion spent on defence. That sum accounts for only a third of the 339 non-structural reliefs. With little data, and scant scrutiny and evaluation, we are sitting on a time bomb.

Take, for example, the cost of the research and development tax credit—up from £2.3 billion to £5.2 billion in five years, yet without an equivalent increase in R&D investment by companies. The patent box relief was introduced to encourage companies to commercialise their inventions, but has now been exploited as a tax loophole. The moment the KPMG partner seconded to the Treasury to write the technical rules for the relief left the Treasury, he produced a brochure entitled "Patent Box: what's in it for you". That relief is costing us £1 billion a year. Entrepreneurs' relief cost £427 million in 2008-09, but that had ballooned to £2.2 billion by

2018-19, the last year for which I could find proper figures. The relief is supposed to encourage investment, but a survey of those who claimed it found that only 8% said the relief had influenced their decision at the point of investment.

Finally, we talk about making work pay, but we have a system in this country whereby the income that people gain from work is taxed at a higher rate than the income they gain from wealth. No such system can ever justify that we are a country that enables work to pay.

Jim Shannon: The rise in taxation for working-class people has implications for their childcare costs. Does the right hon. Lady agree that when it comes to childcare costs, it is impossible to make ends meet, and that working-class people and those on the poverty line need more help? Unfortunately, I do not see that help.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I agree entirely with what the hon. Member says. I simply point out that if we got the money in that was owed to us, spent it wisely and taxed fairly, we would be able not only to pay for childcare costs but to have the high-quality childcare that is essential to ensure that we equalise life chances.

This Government have failed. They have failed to get the money in, they have wasted billions and they have failed to tax and spend in a fair way. Trust and confidence have been squandered. It is time for them to go.

6.18 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I welcome the autumn statement, which set out clear dividing lines between the two parties. The Conservative party wants to grow the cake and the Labour party wants to slice it into ever tinier pieces. The Conservative party understands that we will grow the cake by allowing people to fulfil their own potential, rather than imagining that the only possibility is increasing public spending, with the size of the cake set.

I welcome the autumn statement, but first let me talk about rhetoric. Rhetoric matters when we talk about homelessness, it matters when we talk about immigration and it matters when we talk about welfare. To be absolutely clear, this autumn statement raised benefits for working people by 6.7% and pensions by 8.5%. There is a controversial policy that suggests that those who do not engage with the welfare system should, if they proceed in that way for an unreasonable period, lose some of those benefits. It is easy to misrepresent that policy and to pretend that it is a bid to remove benefits from people who deserve them. The reality could not be further from the truth.

This is a policy like the sugar tax; it aims to alter people's behaviour. In this case, it aims to alter the behaviour of individuals receiving benefits rather than of corporations that make fizzy drinks, but the analogy is, I think, correct. What the policy seeks to do is to encourage people to understand that if they do not do the right and responsible thing as citizens of this country and take the work that we know is out there then there should be consequences. That is not nasty; it is the definition of compassion. We as Conservatives should not be afraid to say that. It is a brave but overdue policy, and we should welcome it.

[Matt Warman]

We should also acknowledge that it is part of a policy that will make a profound difference in particular to people who are able, as we now know from the post-covid environment, to take jobs that involve working from home. I welcome the new conditions around flexible working, which the Secretary of State set out in his opening remarks. As he said, we know that it is possible to work flexibly, but we also know that there is no nirvana of working from home all the time. I welcome in particular the tone that has been struck by the Chancellor and by the new and very welcome Chief Secretary to the Treasury in the way that they have talked about the rights and responsibilities of citizens when it comes to work.

Let me turn to the various issues that are loosely talked about as fiscal drag or tax simplification. The reality is that this autumn statement has overseen a tax cut unprecedented in size and scale for a number of years. Quite simply, that tax cut has come because of the increased headroom that this Government are now able to take advantage of.

The relative complexity of our tax system means that, unfortunately, we are sometimes sucked into an argument about income tax versus national insurance, versus a whole host of other things. We should be honest that the system is too complex. If we did not have the complexity around national insurance, income tax and a whole host of other things, we would be able to have a more honest, straightforward and comprehensive conversation about tax thresholds, about the right and fair level of tax and about where we as Conservatives want to lower it to. We would also be able to have a sensible conversation about some of the cliff edges that have inadvertently crept into the tax system, including around childcare and households that unfortunately have two people earning an amount exceeding the level where, if a single earner in the household exceeds it, the numbers simply do not add up. That is an inadvertent unfairness and one where I think we would all welcome greater simplification.

Another area where greater simplification in this autumn statement is welcome is pensions. I welcome the concept of one pot for life, which will allow us to look beyond the multiplicity of pots that people often accrue over the course of their lifetime, but it highlights the increasing need for the long-term pensions dashboard project to get over the line and underlines the fact that there is a greater opportunity for welcome projects such as open banking to fulfil their potential. All these projects rely on greater digital literacy among the population, and they rely on the Treasury to make further progress on the digital projects that will unleash things such as the pensions dashboard and projects such as making tax digital. All these things will allow greater simplification and greater fulfilment of potential by a host of different parts of our society, and I think we would all welcome some of those projects coming to fruition as quickly as possible.

Overall, I welcome an autumn statement that cuts taxes for 27 million working people. It sees us all benefit, but it also acknowledges that, given the extraordinary few years we have all lived through, from covid to the war in Ukraine, there is much that this Government have to continue to be fiscally responsible for. The call to cut taxes is a sensible one, but it must be done in the measured way that this autumn statement begins to do it.

6.25 pm

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The first duty of any Government is to defend the country and keep its citizens safe, but the autumn statement had nothing to say about strengthening our military capabilities at a time of real concern about the size of our armed forces. We are facing a real crisis in recruitment and retention at a time when our armed forces are running hot, straining themselves to meet growing commitments with less. The defence of the UK starts in Ukraine. We should be stepping up support to help Ukraine through the winter and into 2024, but the Prime Minister is stepping back from UK leadership in Ukraine with no new military funding next year.

My constituents in Halton are looking on in despair as the Government again fail to provide the real-terms support to help them get through the toughest of times. This autumn statement is yet another crushing disappointment at a time when many people in my constituency and across the country consider whether they can afford to heat their homes, pay for food, or even meet the basic cost of staying in their own homes.

The Chancellor seems to have no idea about what matters to real people every day. We know that spiralling energy bills are causing huge anxiety for millions of people. The Chancellor has touted his national insurance cut as a “victory for working people”, but it will be wiped out immediately by the 5% increase in the energy price cap. Citizens Advice tells me that more than 50% of clients seeking debt advice are spending more money on essential bills and costs than they have coming in, and in Halton that figure is significantly higher. In 2023, Citizens Advice in Halton supported 1,713 clients to access the local food bank or other localised social welfare groups. That is almost as many as it assisted in 2019, 2020 and 2021 combined.

The autumn statement also provides little comfort to those who worry about how the Tory mortgage bombshell will continue to affect them. Average rents have increased by 25% since 2019, but the local housing allowance has remained static since April 2022. People need immediate help. By April, many more people will have been evicted. Our local housing list is stretched to breaking point, and, thanks to a lack of action by the Government, that list is getting longer by the day.

People need immediate help. The latest figures from Halton Borough Council state that we have had 3,156 homeless presentations, an increase of more than 50% on the previous year. Due to the increase in homelessness, there is extreme pressure on the local authority to secure temporary accommodation for homeless residents, but unfortunately demand far outstrips supply.

How can the Chancellor claim to be helping working people when so many people have to rely on charity simply to put food on the table? According to End Child Poverty, 32.1% of children in my constituency are living in poverty. The Resolution Foundation says that personal taxes are going up, not down, with the tax cuts announced in the autumn statement dwarfed by the previously announced tax rises in the form of the freezing of national insurance and income tax thresholds for six years.

Charities are also on the frontline when it comes to supporting those in the community who face hardship through illness. Marie Curie illustrates the harrowing

reality when it tells us that, each year, 90,000 people die in poverty in the UK. The Chancellor insists that the best way to tackle poverty is through work, but what does he say to those who are far too seriously unwell to work and will die before they are old enough to claim their state pension? Where is the targeted support for them? Will he commit to exempting terminally ill people from having to look for work?

The Chancellor has done nothing to address the crisis in local government funding. On a population basis, Halton has lost £899 per resident, while the national average cut is £581 per resident, a difference of £318. Therefore, Halton's reduction in funding per head of population has been 55% greater than the national average—a terrible thing for local authorities to cope with. Councils continue to buckle under the strain of rocketing demand for social care. To give a local example, 28% of delayed discharges at Whiston Hospital are Halton people who require some form of social care.

Areas that see increased demand need increased support. I continue to hear from families who cannot access specialist support for their children in school. Once again, education has been left by the wayside. SEN is in crisis. These are some of our most vulnerable children. Local authorities and schools have no idea how to keep up with demand. They and the children's families are in crisis. On top of that, school transport budgets for children with special educational needs and disabilities will become unsustainable for local authorities nationwide as costs are predicted to triple to over £1.1 billion over the course of this decade. According to Stop School Cuts, every school in my constituency faces cuts to its spending power. Again, the Chancellor failed to do anything about that in the autumn statement.

As a result, schools will have to reduce their educational provision, for example by increasing class sizes or reducing individual support. Time and again, constituents have contacted me to complain that the most basic services are unavailable to them. Last month, we lost one of our only remaining dentists who provided NHS treatment. A huge number of patients scramble to access emergency dentistry. That is an utter disgrace. Other constituents are facing years-long waits for operations, while some report that they are unable to access mental health services. That is what is happening in reality on the ground, which the Chancellor's autumn statement completely ignored.

After 13 years of Tory Government, what is their economic legacy? People across the country face the highest tax burden since the second world war, mainly because of the five-year freeze of personal allowances. Households will see the biggest fall in living standards since the 1950s. Growth forecasts are dire. For far too many people, the only growth that they will see is that of poverty. The Government have no answers. They have failed to address Britain's long-standing productivity problem. Public services are in crisis. Nothing works. It is a record of unbelievable incompetence by the Government. The autumn statement offers no prospect of change. We know that the time has come for change, but more importantly, the British people know it and they want to get rid of this failing and incompetent Tory Government.

6.32 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I rise to make a few remarks in support of the Chancellor's autumn statement, emphasising two themes that came out strongly from it. They have been consistent themes for the Government over the past 13 years we have been in office: boosting incomes, particularly for those in the lowest income brackets, and improving our benefits system to ensure that we have a dynamic labour market and individuals can fulfil their maximum potential.

Before I go into those points, it is worth underlining again where we were 13 years ago when we took office. The minimum wage was less than £6 an hour, the state pension was less than £100 an hour—no pensioner will forget the derisory 75p increase that they got from Gordon Brown—and we had a welfare system where more than 1 million people had been languishing out of work for almost 10 years, out of the reach of any meaningful engagement from local job centres. We should not forget either that, while the Labour party might this afternoon present itself as a party of welfare reform, spending restraint and sensible economics, for most of the past 13 years it set its face against every step that we took to try to improve our benefits system. What we have now is not perfect—no benefits system ever is—but it is so much better than what was in place under the previous Labour Government. We know that because Labour Ministers who served in the Department for Work and Pensions before 2010 were themselves highly dissatisfied with the benefits system. Those with particular reforming instincts were doing their best, fighting an uphill battle to see improvements. We should not trust the Labour party as a party of benefit reform.

Briefly on boosting incomes, a national living wage of £11.44 an hour is transformational for constituencies such as mine in Pembrokeshire, where for decades there has been a culture of low pay, as there has been right across Wales. Thousands of people in my constituency will benefit from that increase to the living wage. Increasing the state pension by the full triple lock boost will ensure that pensioners continue to see the full value of their pension increase. That comes at a cost. All of us who defend the triple lock need to bear in mind that it has significant long-term costs, and we need to speak to how they will be met in the future, but the triple lock that this Conservative Government introduced in 2010 has been transformational in lifting pensioners out of poverty in my constituency, and all across the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon: One of the reasons the triple lock is in place is the confidence and supply agreement between the Democratic Unionist party and the Conservative party. It was one of the things that we insisted upon. When it comes to giving credit for things, I want to keep the record straight.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Member makes a strong point on behalf of his party. Lots of people claim credit for the triple lock. Again, all of us who defend the triple lock need to bear in mind the long-term costs and be ready to speak to how the country will afford them. The answer that successive Governments have found of just pushing the state pension further out of reach by increasing the state pension age is not a long-term sustainable plan.

[Stephen Crabb]

On benefit reform, I strongly support what the Government are trying to do in linking together more closely the work of local jobcentres with that of health authorities, health boards and the Department of Health and Social Care overall. Successive Ministers have found huge institutional resistance to the NHS and the DWP working together—two massive spending Departments that have levers to do something really positive in getting people with long-term sickness and disabilities back into work. It is really encouraging to see much greater levels of co-operation than at any time in the past 20 or 30 years.

The point that has been made several times this afternoon about obligations is really important. There was speculation that the Chancellor would not uprate working-age benefits by the higher level of autumn inflation rates, but he did so. That was entirely consistent with what the Conservative Government have done consistently through the pandemic and the cost of living challenges, which is to help people on the lowest incomes. The Government doing the right thing and choosing to be consistent in that underlines the point about obligations, and the social compact that needs to be at the heart of our welfare system. Government Members have talked about that, as have those on the Labour Front Bench. An adequate benefits system supports people on the lowest incomes and provides a strong and secure safety net. There needs to be a sense of obligation around that as well.

As I said, there were Labour welfare Ministers who struggled with how to engage people who had been long-term sick and had long-term health needs to get more meaningful interaction, so that they could perhaps begin a journey back to work if that was appropriate. It is one of the biggest public policy challenges that we as a Government have faced. If the Labour party forms the next Government, it will wrestle with that, too. Governments of countries around the world that share a similar demographic to ours, with an ageing population and increasing numbers of elderly and sick people, are wrestling with these challenges. There are no easy solutions.

Mr Jayawardena: Does my right hon. Friend agree that fundamentally this is just a question of fairness? It is about supporting those who genuinely need our help, but when people choose welfare because they choose not to look for work, hard-working taxpayers should not pay the bill.

Stephen Crabb: I agree with my right hon. Friend to a point. There is always an issue of fairness, and perceived fairness, when it comes to the distribution of taxpayers' money to people.

I question whether there are large numbers of people out there who want to live their lives not working or contributing to our society. If I really press them, the people I meet in my constituency who are struggling with long-term illnesses and have been out of work for a long time, say they would love to be working. They would love to visualise themselves in a job and playing a full part in the economy. The truth is that many of them need support. Some of them need a bit more than just warm words of encouragement, and that is why I have always defended the appropriate use of sanctions and conditionality in our benefits system.

This time of assistive technology, flexible working and homeworking should be a new golden age for people who sadly live with long-term health conditions to be able to get back into the workplace. I am really pleased that Government Ministers are grappling with that and thinking about the long-term steps that could be taken to help people back into work. As I say, that is one of the great public policy challenges of our time.

6.40 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I want to talk about some of the massive challenges we face in Newham, because frankly the autumn statement offers precious little to solve them.

I will start with the scourge of knife crime. In Newham, our communities have been brutalised by knife attacks over many years. August alone saw 38 attacks that caused injury—the highest number for five years—leaving many young lives destroyed, families devastated and communities broken by fear and struggling to heal. The truth is that social problems make young people vulnerable to the gang grooming that leads to that violence. Many young people are growing up with little stability, without even a safe place to call home and with parents racked by the stress of unpayable bills and insecure work.

Far from inspiring confidence, the autumn statement confirmed that the average household is set to be almost two grand worse off by the next election than they were at the last. Those households will know that 40% of the benefits coming from the autumn statement are going to the wealthiest 20% of the population. That unfairness weakens our entire society, because poverty creates vulnerability to grooming. It destroys a young person's trust that our society can provide a decent chance and a future for them.

My community tries to work its way out of poverty, yet it is nigh-on impossible. The lower quartile of earnings in Newham is £1,792 a month, but paying the lower quartile of private rents leaves just £492, before food, energy or transport costs, or the costs of raising a family, are even considered. Our children know it. They see their parents struggling. Gangs are using fake job ads to target children on the social media sites they use, clearly aimed at children who know their parents are up against it—children who want to help make ends meet. When mum and dad are having to take on more hours to pay the bills, meaning there is no one in the house in the evening or at weekends, that is the impact.

Those pressures are huge, but Newham's housing crisis is truly brutal. Tens of thousands of families simply cannot afford private rents, and social housing supply remains minuscule compared with the level of need. The consequence is that 8,363 children are estimated to be homeless in Newham alone. There are more children trapped in temporary accommodation in those 14 square miles than there are in entire regions of the country combined—more than in the east midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the north-east put together. That temporary accommodation is unsuitable for families, or frankly for anyone, with mould, damp and terrible overcrowding.

All that causes chaos in young lives. It massively disrupts education and makes it harder for teachers, social workers or GPs to spot the signs that a young life is going off the rails so that they can intervene. It creates

added costs for our stretched public services, which are scrambling to keep up, and enormous and rapidly increasing costs to the council. The council is spending more than £20 million a year on temporary accommodation costs alone. That is money that it cannot spend on improving children's lives or on youth work to help to make children at risk of involvement in knife crime more resilient. It cannot spend it on keeping the streets clean or on supporting our schools so that they can deal with difficult behaviour without excluding children and practically handing them over to the gangs.

I welcome the Government's boost to the local housing allowance—I really do. It will do something to slow down the rate at which homelessness is getting worse. But, frankly, it is not a solution. Far more strategic action is necessary, and so is more recognition that those problems are interconnected and that our councils and our public services are best placed to solve them. As we know, the Tory pre-election Budget is balanced on massive future cuts to our public services and our councils. The Tories are robbing the next Government in a last-ditch attempt to save themselves. I honestly do not know how Tory Members can look their constituents in the face and tell them that they think the planned cuts are practical or achievable.

Let us face it: our NHS and many other services are on the verge of collapse and utterly failing to deliver for our communities. What we are hearing from the Government does not match the reality that my constituents see all around them. Surely to heavens we must repair our public services and give all our young people a future, with genuinely accessible opportunities in education and in work. We need to restore our children's trust in a future where they are truly rewarded for their contributions to our society and for their massive potential. After 13 years of Tory failure, that will only come about with a Labour Government.

6.47 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): The measures announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his autumn statement are sensible and responsible and will make a real difference to the people and businesses across the two Cities.

The Government have taken a pragmatic approach to delivering tax cuts. We all know that the cost of the measures to support businesses and households through the covid pandemic and the energy price shock caused by Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine drove up spending and meant that tax cuts were impractical for a long time. However, as we continue to rebuild our economy, improve productivity and focus on growth, we do so by following competent and careful economic management. That is why I was pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announce fully funded tax cuts that will have a real impact on both families and businesses. The autumn statement was the biggest package of tax cuts announced as a fiscal event since the 1980s.

For me, there were two major headlines. First, there was the permanent extension of the full expensing policy, which will act as a springboard to help UK companies to invest in the latest technologies and machinery and create highly skilled jobs. Secondly, of course, there was the 2% reduction in national insurance—a tax cut for 27 million people, which will ensure that they will keep more of their earnings to spend or save as they wish.

The Chancellor was also right to prioritise helping people into work to boost the economy. Just last week, I was pleased to join the then employment Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), on a visit to the Italian café and deli Ben Venuti in Pimlico, where we discussed the Government's new hospitality sector-based work academy programme trial run, in partnership with the trade body UKHospitality, to encourage more people into careers in the hospitality sector. That programme, and last week's announcement of a further £50 million to support apprenticeships, clearly show that the Government recognise that getting people into work, and helping them to train, retrain and develop their careers—no matter their age or background—is the best way to help people and support the economy. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham is now the Under-Secretary of State for Transport and will see the Pedicabs (London) Bill through this place.

Not only will the autumn statement provide more opportunities for people to get into new and exciting careers, but the Chancellor has announced significant support for households. Raising local housing allowance rates to the 30th percentile of local market rents in April 2024 will benefit 1.6 million low-income households, which will be £800 a year better off on average. That will certainly be welcome news for thousands of households across the two Cities.

I am proud that my constituency is embracing the life sciences sector, having attracted thousands of jobs to the Paddington basin development. I am delighted that the Imperial College Healthcare Trust's new Fleming Centre is being created in Paddington, backed by £5 million of seed funding announced in the autumn statement. It was where penicillin was first discovered, and the new centre will help us in the global fight against antimicrobial resistance and further establish the two Cities as an important centre for the growing life sciences industry.

I would be remiss not to mention the important work undertaken by the City of London Corporation as it strives to ensure that our financial and professional services remain the best in the world, and that the square mile remains the place in which companies from every corner of the globe want to do business. We know that that has a massive and positive knock-on effect, supporting more than two million jobs across the UK, so it is good to hear that the Chancellor is pressing ahead on the pension reforms that were unveiled with the signing of the Mansion House compact in the City in July this year.

The measures announced in the autumn statement protect not only economic prosperity but our communities. Nobody can be immune from the dreadful scenes in the middle east. Sadly, we have seen the repercussions of terror attacks, and of the ongoing conflict in Gaza, on our own streets. I have been appalled by the testimonies that I have heard from the Jewish community in my constituency, who are genuinely scared of the 1,350% rise in antisemitic incidents in London alone. I therefore welcome the Chancellor's announcement in the autumn statement of £3 million of additional funding this year for the Community Security Trust, and of a further £7 million over the next three years, for organisations such as the Holocaust Educational Trust, to help tackle antisemitism.

I must take this opportunity to highlight one measure that, sadly, we did not see in the autumn statement. It is one that would have profound economic benefits for

[*Nickie Aiken*]

Cities of London and Westminster, the capital and the whole country: tax-free shopping for international visitors. I recognise that the autumn statement delivers support for the retail, hospitality and leisure industries by extending the retail, hospitality and leisure relief scheme, which will continue to provide eligible occupied retail, hospitality and leisure properties with 75% relief on business rates. That is all welcome, but new research from the Centre for Economics and Business Research shows that if the former tax-free shopping scheme had not been scrapped, the total spending from international visitors would have been £3.3 billion more in 2022. The reason for that is the dynamic nature of international visitors' spending habits. Although they would receive a tax break on their shopping, they would still pay VAT in restaurants, theatres, pubs, bars, clubs, hotels and, of course, black cabs. Places such as Knightsbridge and the west end—particularly Oxford Street, Bond Street and Regent Street—have been feeling the pinch since international tax-free shopping disappeared. Large international luxury brands all report seeing a fall in their revenues compared with their outlets in Milan and Paris. We need that scheme back.

The Government recognise the tremendous opportunities that lay ahead for the economy and the United Kingdom, and I applaud the Chancellor for his work to strengthen the economy so that we can now focus on growth and prosperity for all. I look forward to working with him to ensure that the economy continues to bounce back from the pandemic and flourish for years to come.

6.54 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): From listening to some Conservative Members, one might think we were in some sort of economic Shangri-La. The only positive element about the autumn statement is that it was not the previous Chancellor's statement, so I congratulate the Chancellor—perhaps this could be passed on—on not being the previous Chancellor.

In substance, the change of staff in Downing Street means that the country is not quite as far up the creek without a paddle as we may have been under the last Administration, but that is of small comfort to the millions of people who are still paying more for less, so I am sure the Chancellor will understand if I do not give him a high five. He is like a dentist telling the patient that they need only four teeth taken out without anaesthetic rather than five, and dressing that up as good news.

The autumn statement was an act of neglect. The facts from the Office for Budget Responsibility speak for themselves: real growth is down, debt interest is up, inflation is slowing but high, and productivity is in its boots. After 13 years of blundering, every indicator is pointing in the wrong direction. The Conservative party has spent months making lofty pronouncements about long-term decisions, but the Chancellor's statement looked no further than the next election. By now, this House and the British public are used to the wide gap between their claims and fiscal reality.

Does anyone remember the “long-term economic plan” from 2014? What happened to that? What about “strong and stable” in 2017? Where has that gone, and where are northern powerhouse and HS2? It is strange that we did not hear any of those phrases in the statement. Of course, the Chancellor could not even bring himself

to mention “a brighter future”—the slogan that adorned his party conference just a few weeks ago. The statement shows that the Conservatives have not learned a single lesson from their 13 years in power. They have not hit one of their fiscal rules in 13 years.

Once again, we see the old approach, which the public now roundly reject: attacks on our public sector, which is always refused the resources that it needs; and, as we have heard this afternoon, the scapegoating of social security claimants—particularly disabled people—through cuts to the social security system, to pay for the Government's economic chaos. We can see from the polls that the public are tired of the same old Tory approach put forward in the autumn statement. They are tired of NHS waiting lists of nearly 8 million people waiting for healthcare, including 14,000 people in my constituency and constituents of every Member in this Chamber. Almost 200 schools are at the point of collapse because the Government decided to halt the Building Schools for the Future programme. The number of bus services has been halved since 2011, leaving more people isolated and unable to access services. And it goes on: the housing market is in a parlous state; mortgage defaults are going through the roof, if people have one; and many landlords are out of control and using no-fault evictions. In huge swathes of the country, it is almost impossible for people to get a mortgage, let alone pay it.

I will concentrate on two elements. First, on tax, the Chancellor tried to buy off the electorate with headline-grabbing changes to national insurance, but those policies only thinly conceal the true picture of what is happening under this Government. The frozen tax thresholds mean that those who make their living from work will pay tens of billions of pounds more while taxes on the wealthy remain largely flat—that is a political choice; it is as simple as that. Over the pandemic, the top 10% accrued £50,000 each in additional wealth, according to the Resolution Foundation. The list goes on.

In reality, the changes to national insurance that were announced last week will be paid for by cuts in services. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the statement bakes in a real-terms cut, to the tune of £22 billion by 2028, to departmental budgets. That almost exactly matches the £20 billion that was spent on the national insurance proposals announced last week, and of course there will be more cuts in local government, right across the piece. It has been 13 years of blight, with tax cuts paid for by denuding public services and implemented by a deluded Government, and a weaker safety net. It is the same old Conservatives in action.

What about national borrowing? The Tories would have us believe that they borrow less and pay back more, but I will quickly fact-check that claim. The only fact we need to know is that the Tories make it up as they go along: the reality is that they borrow more and pay back less. That is fairly well documented—one or two Conservative MPs may want to ask their researchers to check that with the Library.

Turning to public services, what is that £20 billion of cuts going to look like? It will be dreadful. The Resolution Foundation says that the pain now being proposed is “implausible” in its scale. The Institute for Fiscal Studies broke down those cuts in more detail and found that if some Departments continue to be protected, that means 3.4% cuts across the board for others. That £20 billion of cuts means more bankrupt councils, longer waiting

lists in the courts and fewer police—in short, a continued decline in the quality of our lives, and more pressure on the social fabric that my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) spoke about. It all adds up to the greatest fall in disposable incomes since 1955. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation calls the plans “fundamentally inadequate” to deal with the 4 million people in this country who are in destitution.

What we need—what we are all calling for, including my communities in Bootle—is a general election as soon as possible to get that shower out.

7.1 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on his autumn statement, which was well thought through, soundly based and properly reasoned. Post covid, with war in eastern Europe and the middle east and with the ongoing cost of living crisis, his task is an incredibly difficult one. With 110 growth measures, he has rightly recognised the need to boost growth, but as he has stressed, that growth must be secured on sound foundations and must not take the form of a reckless, debt-fuelled rush for growth. There are areas of reform that I believe he should have covered, such as business rates, social care funding and special educational needs. However, this autumn statement is very much a step in the right direction, and provides a platform on which he and the Government can build in the coming weeks and months.

I will briefly cover three areas, the first of which is investment in skills. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor recognises the importance of that investment to improve productivity and secure sustainable economic growth. In that respect, the announcement of £50 million to increase the number of apprenticeships in key growth areas is to be welcomed. However, there remains a need for a long-term strategy to enhance skills. I look forward to an update on the work of Sir Michael Barber, which was announced in last year’s autumn statement; a significant uplift in revenue funding for further education colleges and training providers; and a review of the apprenticeship levy, which was a welcome initiative when it was introduced in 2017, but is in need of reform so that it can perform to its full potential.

Secondly, we need to continue to protect the most vulnerable. Covid’s tail has been harsh and long and, along with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, has created the kind of cost of living crisis that we have not seen for 100 years. Last year and this year, the Government have stepped up to the plate to support people. As such, many of last week’s announcements are to be welcomed, including increasing the national living wage, increasing all working-age benefits in full by 6.7%, boosting pensions by 8.5% in line with the triple lock, and significantly increasing the local housing allowance.

There is no doubt that there is both a skills shortage and a skills mismatch in the UK at present. It is in that context that I am supportive of the back to work plan, which the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions went through earlier. However, I emphasise two notes of caution. First, the deficit in investment in skills and training that has been prevalent for most of this century means that a lot of people are a long way from the workplace. We should not underestimate the challenge of equipping those people with the skills they need to first hold down jobs, and then embark on

rewarding career paths. Secondly, there are people—those with deteriorating neurological conditions, for instance—who are very worried about the forthcoming review of the work capability assessment. We must do all we can to support them through what will be a period of upheaval, and ensure that we avoid situations where those who are palpably unable to work are asked to do so under the threat of sanction. My concerns have been allayed to a large degree by what my right hon. Friend said in his opening speech, but it is important to emphasise those points.

Thirdly, in the east of England and particularly along the Suffolk and Norfolk coast, there is enormous potential for long-term, rewarding jobs in the low-carbon energy sector. In that context, last week’s various announcements to promote the renewables sector are very welcome. What I would emphasise is that to make the most of that great opportunity, it is vital that as the Government implement their levelling-up agenda, the east is not overlooked. In his speech, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced some new investment zones to follow on from those that were revealed in the autumn statement, none of which was in the east of England. We have a successful enterprise zone in Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth, and I hope we can look at reinvigorating it.

My final point on the need for levelling up in the east of England is that we are the lowest-lying region in the UK, and we have a long and porous coastline. That means that we are particularly vulnerable to flooding and coastal erosion, which are being accelerated by climate change. In recent days, many homes have disappeared over the cliff in Pakefield in my constituency. That has brought despair and desperation to many, and moreover creates risks from dangerous cliffs and the exposure of world war two sweeper markers, which have been detonated today. Thanks are due to the emergency services for all that they are doing, working in appalling conditions to keep people safe, but communities are at severe risk—not only Pakefield, but communities right up and down the Norfolk and Suffolk coast.

Over the course of the next few weeks, we must look very closely at the coastal protection budget and its operation. I urge my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to liaise very closely with my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who is getting up to speed with his new and challenging brief at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

7.8 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What does this autumn statement do for the people of Ealing, Southall? In the 13 years since the Conservative Government came into office, there has been nothing but failed plans and weak growth. This is not about the politics; it is about real people. More than 4,000 people in Ealing, Southall cannot find work—that is 6.8%, nearly double the national rate. The Chancellor promised growth. He told us that he was delivering growth, but where is it? Growth projections are down for this year, next year, and the year after. I hope the Chancellor is ready to fend off any Members of the other place who are keen for his job, as the Prime Minister has made it clear that he does not think the talent is in this Chamber.

From a botched Boris Brexit to a Trussonomics fiasco, and flailing around from one crisis to the next, this Government know the writing is on the wall, because

[Mr Virendra Sharma]

we see slow growth, stagnating pay, higher taxes and falling incomes. Household incomes will still be 3.5% lower next year in real terms than they were pre-pandemic. Across the OECD, we have one of the worst rates, while near peers and neighbours France, Ireland and Japan have higher household incomes than before covid-19.

From speaking to my constituents, I know that the cost of heating, water and food—the staples they need—just keep going up. Many cannot cope, and no one here can have failed to notice. I am proud to work with groups such as Ealing food bank, and many temples, gurdwaras and mosques across my constituency and the country do the same in feeding and clothing those who need it. Ealing food bank is meant to be an emergency service for those in the most dire need, but week in and week out the same people are there, unable to feed their families, their children and themselves because of what this Government have done to the economy. Either this Government cannot agree a plan, or they do not have one.

Whether people have managed to get on the property ladder or still want to, this Government have it in for them. Mortgage rates have further to rise, and the OBR has yet again revised projections up. While people are already facing doubled mortgage rates, the peak is yet to come in 2027. On planning and building, the Government's announcements do nothing to meet the scale of new homes that need to be built. There have been 16 Housing Ministers since they came to office, which shows just how seriously they take the role: more Housing Ministers than houses built by the Ministers. That is in stark contrast to Labour. At conference, we announced a comprehensive package that will help to build 1.5 million homes in five years.

Across west London, poor management of the electricity grid by the Government has held up and delayed the development of housing and jobs. Under-investment and poor planning are choking growth and sending prices up, yet on electricity the Prime Minister and the Chancellor remain ideological, with an extra cost of £180 each and every year for every family. That is the cost of banning onshore wind, and with clean energy dropped, solar crashed and no new carbon storage, this Government seem committed to looking backwards, not forwards.

So I ask: with youth unemployment in Ealing, Southall at nearly double the national rate, what is there for future generations? There are no jobs to be had, there is nowhere to live and there is no environment left, and we have seen the worst hit to living standards on record. Will his record as Chancellor be to lead on this in the biggest tax-raising Parliament on record, or will he be remembered for simply tinkering at the edges and leaving Labour to deal with it?

7.13 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The Chancellor's autumn statement strikes the right balance between providing tax cuts for individuals, mainly through the two percentage point reduction in national insurance for 27 million people, and the biggest tax cut in modern British history of £11 billion for business. All this has been made possible by careful management of the nation's finances and the halving of inflation over the last year.

Since the Prime Minister and the Chancellor took office on 25 October last year, I have strongly supported their economic policy, which has put the defeat of inflation and a reduction in Government borrowing as the top priorities. This is the route to growth, rather than a dangerous policy of unfunded spending increases and unfunded tax cuts that would lead only to a latter-day Barber boom. The Chancellor's economic policy is following in the footsteps of the Thatcher, Major and Cameron Governments, all of whom bequeathed sound public finances and robust economic growth to their successors, and the Government's policy is working.

Contrary to the unfounded scare stories peddled by the Opposition parties, the UK has grown faster than Germany and France since the pandemic, and Government borrowing is set to fall from 5% of GDP last year to 1.1% of GDP by 2028-29. Having listened to the litany of criticisms from the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), I hope that she will also be admonishing her friends in the Labour Welsh Government for their appalling mismanagement of the NHS in Wales, where waiting lists per capita are far higher than in England.

The autumn statement is impressive in its breadth of detail, but time is short so I would like to highlight a few key areas in addition to the personal and business tax cuts I have already mentioned. Given its great natural beauty, my constituency of Clwyd South has many hospitality businesses, so I was very pleased by the Chancellor's extension of the retail, hospitality and leisure relief—a measure that I and many of my colleagues campaigned for—for another year, and his announcement that alcohol duty will be frozen until August next year.

I am also glad that the Chancellor dispelled the uncertainty about the pensions triple lock by confirming an increase of 8.5% for next year, and that he is raising all working-age benefits in full by 6.7%, with both increases well above the current rate of inflation. The Government are also right to tackle long-term unemployment by strengthening support for those who want to work, while toughening sanctions for those who are not looking hard enough, as was outlined by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions at the start of the debate. If I may, as an idea for the Budget next year, I suggest that the Chancellor considers raising the VAT threshold to help small businesses such as the Two Doves café in Overton in my constituency.

I am also delighted by the Chancellor's announcement that one of the 12 new investment zones will be located in Wrexham and Flintshire. As the MP for Clwyd South, I represent half of the Wrexham County Borough Council area. Having pressed the case for the investment zone with the Government on multiple occasions, including on the Floor of the House, I was honoured to be mentioned by the Chancellor in his statement alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton), and to visit Airbus in Broughton with him the day after the statement.

The strength of the case put forward for the investment zone lay in the highly effective campaign by a cross-party group of politicians and business owners, chaired by Joanna Swash, chief executive officer of Moneypenny, and including representatives of Wrexham and Flintshire councils—they deserve a great deal of credit in this process—as well as JCB, Airbus, Net World

Sports, Theatr Clwyd, the North Wales Mersey Dee Business Council, Wrexham University and Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre Cymru.

Not only is this a major win for north-east Wales, but the autumn statement also extended the level of funding and tax relief available to investment zones to £160 million over a period of 10 years to provide greater certainty to investors. Previously, each zone was set to receive £80 million of support over a five-year period. It is estimated that this could leverage an additional £1.7 billion of investment for Wrexham, Clwyd South and Flintshire, and help create thousands of new jobs.

In conclusion, I warmly welcome the autumn statement, which will lead to a continued fall in inflation and Government borrowing, and, due to the depth and breadth of its well-targeted measures, ensure the growing strength of our economy across all regions of the UK in the years to come.

7.19 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Ind): The Government have tried some sleight of hand with this so-called “autumn statement for growth” just as the OBR has revised its projections for the economy downwards. Indeed, the OBR’s figures for the coming years tell a very different story from the Chancellor’s: GDP growth was nil in the three months to September, while the OBR has revised growth for next year down by more than half from 1.8% to 0.7%, for the year after that down from 2.5% to 1.4%, and for 2026 marginally down as well. These figures are cause for alarm, signalling a potential economic downturn. In fact, retail sales are already falling and unemployment is rising. The OBR now forecasts that unemployment will go even higher than previously thought, reaching 4.6% by 2025.

If we have learned anything from the past 13 years of the Tories at the helm of the economy, it is that working people and the most vulnerable in our society are always the ones who are made to pay the price for their damaging decisions. A clear example is the Chancellor’s spin over the cuts to national insurance, which in reality will give back to workers less than a quarter of the £44.6 billion that will be taken away from them in frozen tax thresholds by 2028. As my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) advised, the 5% energy price cap rise will impact as well. These national insurance cuts will not do anything to help those earning less than the threshold, who are mostly low-paid, part-time workers and those in the gig economy lacking basic employment rights and protections, and they will disproportionately impact women.

Furthermore, the total absence of additional funding for public services will hit those most in need the hardest. Taking £1.2 billion out of the pockets of disabled people and affecting 700,000 people with a one-third cut in their benefits and increased conditionality, while handing businesses £12 billion in tax giveaways, is totally unconscionable. But it serves as a reminder, if we ever needed one, of whose interests the Conservative party serves. It is not its billionaire backers who will be impacted by the record waiting lists in the NHS, as they all have private healthcare, nor will it be their children whose education is negatively impacted by cuts to school budgets. How can the Government claim to be promoting economic growth when the very fabric of our society is fraying at the seams after more than a decade of crippling austerity?

At the local authority level, as well, we are seeing councils across the country teetering on the brink of collapse. They have enormous holes in their finances. What do we on Teesside get from the Government in response? We get the condescending slur of “holes” of a different variety.

Thanks to the Conservatives’ decision to slash local government funding, along with the disgraceful mismanagement of the previous administration in my town, Middlesbrough Council has been put in the unwelcome position of having to sell its major income-generating assets to try to deliver a balanced budget. While food banks creak under the strain and thousands of children go to school hungry, we have the farce of Members on the Conservative Benches blaming the newly elected Labour administration for clearing up the mess left by others.

Another matter that the Chancellor addressed in his statement that has a major impact on my constituency relates to freeports. The Government have announced their intention to extend the duration of the tax reliefs available in freeports from five to 10 years. The Chancellor explained that this decision was made in part thanks to “tenacious representations” by

“the unstoppable Mayor of Tees Valley”.—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 332.]

I must say that that description of the Mayor is not incorrect. He has certainly been unstoppable in locking the taxpayer into dreadful deals that set up private investors with all the reward but none of the risk, which is left to the public purse. In the latest edition of *Private Eye* we are told how the reckless boasting of Lord Houchen regarding the announcement of British Steel setting up an electric arc steel recycling plant on Teesside—on its own land—has left the Chinese-owned company with the British taxpayer over a barrel. Too eager to claim credit for something that has nothing to do with him and to present the deal as done while the company is still in negotiations with the Government over subsidies, he has potentially cost the public purse astronomical amounts of money. Such is the arrogance displayed by the Mayor, his office even put out a video showing him hand-signing a legal agreement with the caption “new electric arc furnace”, although on closer inspection the document turned out to be an old one for a solar farm.

This sums up how the Conservative party operates: all smoke and mirrors, when behind the façade its decisions only leave the British public worse off, much like this tawdry “autumn statement for growth”. The Home Secretary really let the Tory party mask slip with his foul-mouthed outburst last week, but he and his colleagues should be in no doubt that the people of Teesside and people across the country have long memories and will let their voices be heard at the ballot box as soon as they get their chance.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): As I will be leaving the Chair shortly, I just want to wish everybody a happy Lancashire Day—and how better to follow that than by calling a proud Cornishman, Steve Double.

7.26 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

[Steve Double]

It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate on the autumn statement because there is so much in it to be welcomed, but most importantly I welcome the pragmatic approach being taken to see inflation fall and address the challenges in our public finances in a responsible manner.

It is important that we acknowledge the difficult circumstances that are the backdrop to this statement: the once-in-100-year challenge of the covid-19 pandemic, followed so quickly by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the shock that sent through the global energy markets, mean that this Government are having to face a set of economic and public finance challenges that we have not seen in living memory. One of those challenges on its own would have been enough; the difficulty created by having to deal with both in such quick succession cannot be underestimated.

The Government rightly spent the money they did to protect jobs and businesses and to support households through the pandemic and the energy crisis, but we are often quick to forget all that they did. We must also remember that the money has to come from somewhere. We must not forget, either, that no matter how loudly those on the Opposition Benches shout, on almost every measure we introduced to support households and the economy, the Opposition said it was not enough and we should do more.

We will also never forget that the Leader of the Opposition wanted lockdowns to be longer and harder. We know that if the Opposition had been in government for the last three years, lockdowns would have been longer, more money would have been spent, the recovery would have been slower, and debt would be higher and we would have to be raising taxes even more in order to pay for it all. In the light of that backdrop, it is remarkable that the Chancellor has been able to announce the measures he has, and that has only been possible because of our responsible approach to managing the economy.

I welcome the 2% cut in national insurance, which will put hundreds of pounds back in the pockets of those in work. I welcome the increase in pensions by inflation and the retention of our commitment to the triple lock; the 8% rise will mean the state pension will be £3,750 a year more than in 2010, which is a testament to this Government's support for and commitment to pensioners. I welcome benefits being increased by 6.7%, in line with inflation; I represent a constituency where 13,500 households are on universal credit and it is vital that benefits keep pace with rising prices. I very much welcome the increase in the local housing allowance, too; it is particularly important in Cornwall that the Government have been able to do that, because we have among the highest rents when compared with average incomes.

I also welcome the support to businesses, especially the extension of the 75% reduction in business rates for many high-street businesses. That is so important, particularly for hospitality businesses in mid-Cornwall that in recent years have been facing some of the most difficult times. I also welcome the rise in the national living wage to £11.44 an hour. That will give a substantial pay rise to so many workers in St Austell and Newquay, but we have to be clear that although the Government set that figure, it is businesses that will have to find the

money from their revenues to pay it. I therefore encourage the Treasury team to continue to look in the coming months at what more can be done to support our small businesses. Although the measures announced are welcome, many businesses will still face challenging times in the months and years ahead.

I was delighted that the Chancellor made clear that the content of the autumn statement was only the start of tax reductions, and we look forward to more. If I may be so bold, I will suggest one. I welcome the new Financial Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) to his place, and he will be familiar with this idea. I encourage him to use his new position to influence the Treasury to look again at cutting VAT for tourism and hospitality. When that was cut through the pandemic, we saw how positive it was in boosting that important part of our economy, so I encourage him to look at that again.

My final point is on the care sector, which is already struggling in so many ways and is concerned about the impact of the rise in the national living wage. Will the Treasury look again at what more can be done to support that sector in the coming months, because otherwise absorbing the rise in the living wage will put even more pressure on a system that is already creaking?

I very much welcome the autumn statement. With the backdrop of the challenges we are facing, it is welcome that we have been able to come forward with these measures. We have made the right decisions at this time, and I look forward to more to come in the months ahead.

7.31 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Just listening to some of the comments from right hon. and hon. Members, we could be forced to think we were living in a different Britain. I think about the emails I receive from constituents who are struggling and crying out for the Government to help. I think about the people worried about the changes to their benefits—people who through no fault of their own cannot work—and yet the Government say, “If you do not work, you will lose your benefits.” Even trying to get through to the Department for Work and Pensions is a struggle and a challenge for a number of those people. I hope that, in introducing the proposals in this autumn statement, the Government think about how we care for the most vulnerable in society.

This autumn statement marks just over a year since the disastrous mini-Budget, and we can all remember that. When so many people in the UK were struggling, the then Prime Minister thought that the best thing to do was to lift bonuses for bankers and give tax cuts to the rich. When so many were just trying to get their feet back on the ground after covid, we saw tax cuts being awarded to some of the richest in our country. That is not how we should be responding. The current Prime Minister is trying to say that he represents change, but this autumn statement is a watered-down version of the same flawed priorities that are failing my constituents and others right across the country. As a result, my constituents are paying a lot more of their hard-earned money simply to put food on the table.

I visited one of our food banks in Waterloo, just across the bridge from here, which is busy every day. A few weeks ago, the owner of that food bank, Bishop

John Francis and I visited St George's cathedral, which has opened a food pantry. We need those services now, because people—including even those who are in work—are struggling to buy the basic things. The terminology “in-work poverty” should shame us. These people are working, yet they cannot make ends meet. Sadly, that is nothing new.

The fact is that for the past 13 years, my constituents and many across the country have been let down badly. Their local services have been cut to the bone, waiting times across our hospitals are out of control, and their wages are growing nine times slower than they were under the last Labour Government. They have been let down because this Government's priorities are not the country's priorities. This Government's priority seems to be them and their friends, and that is sad. It is no wonder that so many people feel disillusioned with politics and think we do not care about their everyday issues.

I think about those people who come to my advice surgery begging for help and asking if the Government will listen to their claims and fund local councils so that basic services can be restored. When I was growing up, those services were there to help people, but they have now been decimated. Actions speak louder than words, and for proof of that we need only look at who the Prime Minister has brought back in. The key architect of the austerity measures is now back at the heart of Government. That shows that nothing has changed.

My constituents have been waiting far too long, and sadly this Government have shown time and again that they will not change and will not listen to people's concerns. People are coming to us as their MPs to talk about their priorities, and it is important that we make sure those changes happen. Those priorities include building the homes required; ending zero-hours contracts so that people can have decency and a fulfilling job; ensuring that women can go back into the labour market with affordable childcare; and building affordable homes, as opposed to homes that no one can afford to buy. This Government say they will end no-fault eviction, yet at every opportunity they move the goalposts. People are being demonised just for their sexuality, yet the Government say, “We do not care.” I hope that the Government will listen and change, and recognise that this autumn statement does not help people in Vauxhall and across the country. The only thing that will help those people is a general election and a new Government.

7.37 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): First, I applaud the Ministers in His Majesty's Treasury. Sticking to electorally hard positions goes against the natural political grain, but doing so has halved inflation. The autumn statement has done a great deal for every man, woman and child in Clacton and the wider nation. Despite this all-consuming effort to tame the tiger of inflation, which is working, we have still managed to protect the £78 million that is being invested in Clacton. I thank the Government for listening to my repeated pleas to look after coastal communities. That is levelling up.

I welcome a number of the measures, but I do so in a cautious manner. First, I welcome the fact that we have protected and fulfilled our manifesto pledge to keep the pension triple lock in place. I have fought for the past three months to keep our commitment to pensioners, and I am thrilled that the effort has won out in the end.

The tax reliefs for the English freeports are being extended from five to 10 years, with an additional £150 million investment opportunity fund. That potentially is great news for the Harwich freeport, but serious connectivity issues need to be dealt with in Clacton. If the people from Jaywick in Clacton do not see the benefit of this economic expansion, I will regard the whole freeport thing as a failure. Economic growth, particularly when backed by the state, cannot come without societal good.

I would also like to have a word regarding the banks. I thought our central bank was painfully slow to respond to the blatantly obvious inflationary bubble post-covid. Our current rate of 5.25% is a result of the backdrop of being too low for too long, and the subsequent climb was far too incremental, starting in December 2021. Our high levels of interest at a time of falling inflation could well represent the banking sector profiting out of the Bank of England's tardiness, and that cannot be right. The Bank of England needs to respond in a reasonable way or risk the ire of the business community and of this House. We need to lower interest rates as soon as possible, to save some of the businesses in my constituency that are on the brink.

The bulk of my comments, however, come directly from and relate to our wonderful sunshine coast in Clacton. I reached out to a number of businesses and promised to be their voice, fulfilling my pledge to be Clacton's man in this place. Here is what they had to say. Gavin Smith of Hedingham and Chambers buses—a firm doing amazing work, and I want to help it do better—wanted me to tell the Treasury that the £2 billion for development of zero-emission buses technology is great news, and it wants to work with that.

Of course, employees will welcome the 2% NI cut, but the massive 25% corporation tax rate hits business hard. The Cameron-Osborne years, which were just referred to, proved that lower and competitive taxes yield more for the Treasury due to the stimulus that gives to investment in the private sector. We must return to that fact of life that we as Conservatives all know.

There is one clear voice of concern from the sunshine coast, and it is one that I support. The minimum wage increase to £11.44 is excellent for so many, but for more than two decades Governments have been using a disingenuous term. They say, “We are increasing pay”, but let us be clear that they are not increasing pay but telling others to increase pay. What does that mean in real terms? For Amazon, a firm that saw profits explode thanks to covid spurring online sales and which had \$513 billion of global revenue in 2022, it means little. For leisure businesses such as the Lifehouse in Weeley, it is devastating. Peter Murphy, its chief executive officer, told me that it expected its fixed costs to increase by £500,000. The company is a model business—it employs locally, gives to charity, has regenerated historic grounds, and even its restaurant menus show where produce has been sourced from in the immediate area—but it faces extinction unless something is done.

Hospitality and social care are the mainstay of our economy in Clacton, and they are not like Amazon, which measures profits in tens and hundreds of millions or billions and can pay more without a second thought. These businesses have high human resource headcounts and have to live with very tight margins. We need to protect them from increasing costs.

[Giles Watling]

In this day and age, to treat all private entities as if they have the same capacity is madness. The mandates should be like tax on profit—they should fall heavier on the broadest shoulders. I am fine with the idea of special taxation on certain giants to retire the covid debt, the interest on which is a millstone around the national neck, but we cannot pretend that wages are Government money. They are businesses' money, and that is not inexhaustible.

With falling inflation and key investments, we are well on the way to recovery. However, the message from Clacton is that that recovery is led by businesses, not by Whitehall. That means we need get the costs off their backs and let them do what they do and know best.

7.42 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. I am afraid that the autumn statement will have come as a disappointment to many living in my North Shropshire constituency and rural places across Britain. After years of mismanagement, the Conservative Government have left hard-working people to pay for their mistakes. Some elements of the statement were welcome, such as lifting the freeze on housing allowance and increasing the national living wage, but they will not change the daily reality for many of my constituents who are struggling with stealth tax hikes and spiralling mortgage repayments.

I turn first to the Chancellor's announcement to increase the national living wage by almost 10%. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I welcome the increase for the lowest paid, but, for people in rural areas, it will not offset the impact of the cost of living crisis. People in rural Britain spend an average of £800 more a year on fuel because of poor public transport, and those who are off grid are still paying about twice the amount for their heating oil than they were before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I therefore urge the Government to support off-grid residents with their energy bills by implementing an off-grid energy cap so that those affected do not have to continue to choose between heating and eating.

The Chancellor has increased the living wage but failed to help local councils fund those increased wages. I have heard from councils run by all political parties that they are currently struggling to provide good services because of the crippling costs of social care, special educational needs and disabilities support, and temporary housing. Councils will have to pay either directly or to their contractors the cost of those increased wages, yet the Chancellor is asking them to find that money from their existing budgets.

That brings me to the closely related subject of social care. There were no announcements of any new investment in adult social care, or indeed children's social care, in the Chancellor's statement. For anyone who provides or receives social care, that will be incredibly worrying. Social care services are already under immense pressure, waiting lists for care assessments and provision are at all-time highs, and there are serious retention and recruitment problems in the sector—and they are especially acute in rural places such as Shropshire. Not only did the Chancellor fail to address that in his statement, but

his unfunded announcement of an increase in the national living wage will only put further pressure on those services.

Shropshire Council has reported that it spends 85% of its budget on social care. Since I was elected, I have spent a significant amount of time talking to care providers in North Shropshire. They report struggling desperately to meet the need for care packages; they often cross-subsidise them through their private work. But care providers for adults with learning disability, autism spectrum disorder or lifelong high levels of need often do not have such private work, so with central Government not funding the increased wage costs—or local government unable to raise its own finance—there is a risk of a huge crisis in the sector. Crucially, a social care service under more pressure will have dangerous knock-on implications for bed availability in hospitals and—where I am, this is the most acute problem—ambulance waiting times.

After hearing the autumn statement, many people will feel they are about to relive last winter's NHS nightmare, which the Government have repeatedly promised to prevent. For example, in the last week, NHS Shrewsbury, Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care Board has urged my constituents to stay away from A&E if at all possible because it knows that the department will be under extreme pressure with limited bed availability. The root cause of that is in delays in discharging patients who are well enough to leave hospital. That will only be exacerbated if care providers are unable to recoup their staffing costs from the local authority paying them to provide that care. It is a disgrace that the Government have not recognised the desperate need for investment in adult social care, and as such hospitals are bracing for another incredibly difficult winter.

Conservative Ministers have not got a clue about how to get the economy back on track. They simply do not understand that a healthy economy needs a healthy population, and that requires a healthy NHS and a healthy care sector. The Tories have cut taxes for the big banks and let fossil fuel extractors off the hook from the windfall tax. Liberal Democrats urge the Government to look again at those taxes to fund the sectors that will allow the economy to grow again.

I turn to the Chancellor's decision to lift the freeze on local housing allowance to support more households with paying their rent. I am sure that is good news for the 8.5 million people who the National Housing Federation estimated are living with unmet housing need this year. A lack of affordable and social housing is a real issue in North Shropshire, where the average house price is 8.6 times average earnings, according to the all-party parliamentary group for rural business and the rural powerhouse, of which I am a member. About 175,000 people are on rural housing lists at the moment, and homelessness is increasing, especially among young people.

I draw the House's attention to two key shortfalls to the announcement. First, the Chancellor did not commit to ruling out reinstating a freeze in the future, so the policy could be reversed, with the result that councils cannot easily plan ahead their financial budgets. Secondly, it did not apply to temporary accommodation, so the maximum subsidy will remain capped at 90% of rates in January 2011. In my constituency alone, the number of

households living in temporary accommodation has more than doubled since 2018, placing yet more strain on council budgets.

Councils of all political parties have recently written an open letter to the Chancellor to explain the unprecedented demand for temporary accommodation and its associated astronomical increase in costs on their budgets. They need urgent clarification that housing allowance will not be frozen again in future and that they will be subsidised to manage this difficult problem going forward.

On mobile signal investment, I welcome the Government's announcement that 10 regions will be awarded funding for 5G connection for businesses and residents. Mobile connection is an issue that I have significant personal experience with. A mobile signal is essential to a functioning community and paves the way for successful and growing businesses. It will surprise no one that all those areas of the UK that do not receive a 4G signal are classed as rural. Thirteen per cent of my constituency is a partial notspot, and 50% of indoor spaces in North Shropshire do not receive a 4G signal from any of the top four operators. That significantly impacts businesses in my constituency as they struggle to operate without a signal. Therefore, while 5G technology is welcome, I hope that the Government will understand that, to level up rural Britain, a 4G signal needs to be available first.

To conclude, I am worried about the stability of local government to provide essential services, the impact on the health service and the levelling-up of rural Britain.

7.49 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): It is real pleasure to welcome a much more optimistic and extensive statement than I had thought. A few weeks ago, we heard stories that inflation was higher and stickier than we thought, interest rates were forecast to be higher for longer, and it could be a miserable statement to sit through. Then, we heard stories that we may not be able to increase pensions by the triple lock and benefits by inflation. Then, we heard the rumours that our priority was inheritance tax, and I thought I would be here opposing the autumn statement, but fortunately I can wholeheartedly welcome it.

My constituents will be particularly pleased by the support to pay their bills: the national living wage is up by nearly 10%, the state pension by 8.5% and benefits by the full rate of the consumer prices index from September. More unexpected was the increase in local housing allowance back to the 30th percentile, which is much needed. The system has been creaking, and we need to maintain it at that level. The Government should be commended for all those measures. On a local note, I welcome the investment zone announced for Derby, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. We look forward to seeing the full detail, but it looks to be positive for local growth. Businesses in my high streets and the hospitality sector will welcome the business rate reliefs that were announced.

I want to touch on three topics: the corporation tax changes, the pension changes and the various measures to make work pay. To give some certainty, we should have a long-term, predictable plan for what our tax system should look like, so I welcome the 2% reduction in national insurance down to a nice, round, easy-to-calculate 10p in the pound. That fits quite well with the 20p income tax rate, so we have a nice, neat 30p in the

pound and people understand what they are paying. They know that if they earn more than £50,000, that goes up to 40p, and they have to add the 2p national insurance, or a bit less. That is a clear and predictable way of taxing people's earnings.

Now, we need to work out where the starting points in the bands should be, because that has gone a bit out of control. We were trying to get to the stage where someone could earn the minimum wage and not pay any income tax, but that is now thousands of pounds away. I urge the Government, having made this welcome step, to set out a plan for setting a much higher starting point for paying income tax and national insurance. It should be heading back towards a point where someone working full time on the minimum wage does not pay much tax.

Equally, on corporation tax, the plan we had 13 years ago for a stable business tax system appears to have drifted away. I support the full expensing, but that is a pretty radical and permanent change to our corporation tax system. There is a huge compliance need for businesses to track all their fixed assets and split them between the general pool, the long-life asset pool, the short-life asset pool, the vehicles and the structures rules, working out what is a non-allowable structure and what is not. All those things are hugely complex. We are now allowing full expensing for the vast majority of spend. We should think about whether we need all those rules, or whether we could sweep them away and just have some anti-avoidance restrictions. What should we do with the legacy situation? It will be a bit bizarre to have full tax relief for the capital I have spent this year, but still having to work out and claim relief for what I spent 15 years ago, which is still working its way through the pool. That looks to be a long and unwieldy system. Could we find a way of running off those legacy balances a bit more quickly, so we can lose that complexity?

On the pensions changes, I support the pot for life approach that the Government are consulting on. The counter argument is that it takes away the link between employers and their employees' pension, but the simple fact that we had to auto-enrol 10 million people into a workplace pension suggests that those employers were not bothered about the pension they gave their staff, because they were not giving them one at all. Trying to boost the individual's engagement with their pension savings is a prize worth having. If someone moves job to an employer with a good pension scheme, they can choose to stay there—they do not have to stay in their pot for life. I think that we will need a clearing house to avoid costs on employers, because otherwise small employers with 12 employees will be left trying to work out how to pay 12 different pension schemes a month. That sounds a bit too complex.

I have been banging on for years that auto-enrolment has got stuck being cheap and easy for employers, but does not produce the best returning pension for savers, so I welcome the references in the Green Book to a new duty on employers to think about the quality of their pension scheme for their scheme members. That will help move auto-enrolment in the right direction to the best staff pension.

I largely welcome the various welfare changes. Clearly, it is right that a welfare system be conditional. People who can work and look after themselves and their families should do so, and to those who cannot we should give as

[Nigel Mills]

much support as we possibly can. That is an undisputable foundation of the welfare system. However, it has gone a little out of kilter. Far too many people are successful at being out of work for life. We need to find a way of changing that. However, I would warn the Secretary of State to be cautious about the message that people get, because they tend to hear the bad news, not the good news. All the good news about extra support and the chance to work guarantee are drowned out by noise about stricter assessments. People still do not trust the system as they should. We should be careful not to lose the good messages in the necessary bad ones. The evidence shows that if people feel supported, trust the work coach they are working with and feel they have a predictable journey that supports them, they will engage with it. If they are worried that if they make a step and it does not work, and they are reassessed and tell the work coach, that will be used against them next time, they will not engage. We must tread carefully.

I accept the need to ensure that the work capability assessment is getting people in the right place. Only people who are never fit for work should be declared not ever fit for work. That has to be right, but I urge some caution in that language. I note the rather strange thing at the end, quite rightly reinstating the rule that if someone does not comply with the terms of the benefit, they lose the benefit. That rule was there pre-universal credit, and it is right, so I am not sure how it will cost £10 million a year to reintroduce it. Perhaps we have not scored that yet, and we will see that detail in future.

7.56 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Let me begin by congratulating the Prime Minister on raising relaunches to an art form that should be admired. It began in his conference speech, when he announced that he was the new agent of change. That lasted about a week of Tory party infighting. Then, we had the King's Speech three weeks ago. There was no change in that; it was all very much the same from a Government who have run out of steam and ideas. Third time lucky: with the autumn statement he had a chance to turn the corner to improve our economy, invest in public services and support working people. But what did we get? A party political autumn statement, purely focused on attempting to move the dial of the opinion polls for the next general election.

The headline grabber was the national insurance cut, but it does not take an economist to work out that people will be paying more taxes. Going into the autumn statement, the increase in NI was about 10p. We have now been given back 2p, so to use the analogy of the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) about cake, it was like taking the cake away and giving back two small slices. Then, because of the freezing of personal allowances later this year, not only will those two slices be taken again, but the Government will have everything else in the cake tin. Added to that, inflation is still high: in the last two years it has risen by 16%, with food inflation up 28%. The Prime Minister claims to have got inflation down, but it has had nothing to do with him—it is down to the Bank of England. That will not con people, because prices in the shops are still rising.

How did we get here? As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said, the Government say it is, "Nothing to do with them, mate". That has been the line all along. This has been the accumulation of 13 years of not only austerity but a way of dismantling the state. The criminal justice system is in absolute crisis; health is broken; local government is bleeding on its feet; education is in a dire situation. In local public health, drug and alcohol services and others have been slashed because of the effects of Government spending. We have had flatlining growth and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) said, people paying more for less.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions tried to present a cuddly image, saying that the Government's welfare changes were all about getting people into work. I have no problem with genuinely supporting people into work, but the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness let the cat out of the bag when he said that they were about changing people's behaviour—as though people somehow choose to be on welfare. We just heard the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) say that he would get a bit nervous if the language around that gets too harsh, but that is exactly what the Conservatives are going into the election with. They will say, "We've cut taxes and we're going to be hard on the feckless poor," which is how they see people on welfare.

We are in this situation because of the pressures on people's daily lives. The Secretary of State's only suggestion on mental health was for more talking sessions. Well, I am sorry but if we do not replace the money for local government, social services and other infrastructure at a local level, mental health crises will increase. We have the ludicrous idea that the answer for people who are on welfare because of their mental health is to get them working from home. I support people with mental health issues going into work, but it must be the right type of work. The idea that sitting at home will help people's mental health is, frankly, ridiculous.

I was shocked that there was no continuation of funding for the suicide prevention programme. Suicide is the biggest killer of men, but the programme will run out in March because there was no extra funding in the autumn statement. It would cost £1.40 per person to address that crisis, the shameful stigma of suicide and the suicide rates in this country, which are still far too high.

On local government, the Government's botched announcement last week on levelling up came against the background of a sector that has had a 30% cut in its real-terms funding. Durham County Council has lost £262 million a year and the Government produce their shuffle trick and say, "Why aren't you still producing services?", implying that it is somehow inefficient. The cost is then moved on to local council tax payers. This is part of the Conservative Government's deliberate strategy over the past 13 years of dismantling those parts of the state that we have always recognised as being vital to the coherence of our local communities.

I want to raise one issue relating to sub-postmasters. People know that I have been campaigning for them for well over 13 years. I just hope that money is set aside in the Treasury for full compensation. On a personal note, the person who got me into this, my constituent Tom Brown, unfortunately passed away last night. Tom was prosecuted

by the Post Office. He will not get justice. He goes to his grave without the justice that he deserves—one of far too many.

There is no change in the autumn statement. It is time for change, as other colleagues have said. The only way we will rebuild Britain, rebuild our communities and rebuild the state—not a state that tells us what to do, but a state that is there for our constituents and our communities—is if we have a general election and elect a Labour Government.

8.3 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, not least because the Chancellor confirmed, as many of us predicted, that the Government would not just meet the target of halving inflation by the end of the year, but do significantly better. Forecasting is, of course, never an exact science. As the OBR report says:

“The economy has proved to be more resilient to the shocks of the pandemic and energy crisis than anticipated.”

That is probably the closest we will get to, “Sorry, we got it wrong,” from the OBR. It got the baseline so badly wrong, with GDP standing 3% higher, it has had to revise down rates of subsequent growth to take account of the higher starting point. Even then, it still admits that GDP will be 0.5% higher than the March forecasts. That has enabled the autumn statement to reflect the success of the Government’s policies, delivering the largest tax cuts since the ’80s. This is an autumn statement for jobs and growth, putting more money in people’s pockets, helping people to keep more of the money they earn and ensuring that work always pays.

Last Friday, I held a jobs and advice fair for the over-50s in my constituency, helping scores of people who were looking for new employment, skills or training opportunities. Local employers have hundreds of vacancies right now, so boosting skills and addressing employment gaps is vital. For employers, I particularly welcome the largest tax cuts in modern history. Full expensing being made permanent is absolutely what industries in Stoke-on-Trent need, and it will significantly encourage further investment in prosperity and jobs growth.

There are more jobs available in Stoke-on-Trent than people unemployed, so the autumn statement’s focus on getting people into meaningful work is very welcome. As we know, the routine of a meaningful working life is beneficial to mental health, but that can be tragically hard to see for some suffering from severe mental health challenges and other health challenges. I am sure we have all had heartbreaking conversations with constituents in that position, and of course there should always be the support in place for those who need it most, but all the evidence tells us that it is right that we support them into the security of work and help them to improve their condition, because work can make a huge difference in helping people get over both health issues and mental health issues. The expansion of the individual placement and support scheme, providing intensive and tailored expert support for those with severe challenges, is welcome, as is the expansion of talking therapies for those with moderate and mild conditions.

It is right to reform the fit note process, so that treatment is prioritised over time off. In total, £1.3 billion over five years will help 700,000 people with health conditions to find jobs: good for the economy, good for

employers and, most importantly, good for them and their families. It is not being cruel to be kind; it is being kind to be kind. It is only if that kindness and support is rejected that sanctions, reluctantly, will have to be used as a last resort. For those who are capable of working but refuse to do so—those who do not engage—I think most of our constituents would want us to ensure that action is taken to support them into work. Indeed, the Chancellor has ensured that the carrots, as it were, for being in work have increased across the board. The cuts in national insurance payments, the increase in the national living wage and the increase in the minimum apprenticeship wage are all welcome, making work the most attractive option, alongside uprating benefits and the state pension.

I was very happy to hear the Chancellor say that that is as much a moral imperative as an economic one. This is about fairness for everyone. No one should be written off and left on the scrapheap, as we saw with so many under the last Labour Government. Equally, no area should be left behind and the levelling-up agenda that we have enjoyed since Brexit must continue to deliver meaningful change. The UK has grown faster than other countries throughout Europe, but we must ensure that every single part of the UK, including communities in Stoke-on-Trent, benefit from that increased prosperity. That includes the transforming cities fund package, generously funded by the Government but delayed by covid—and, I have to say, by Network Rail and Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Shockingly, the city council’s current Labour leadership has even delayed our levelling-up projects, revisiting some of them and revising down some of the ambition that will have a massive impact on what we were hoping to deliver. The ambitious leadership we need for our city is very much lacking when it comes to the Labour administration at the council.

That must not happen to our restoring your railway projects under the Network North proposals. We, as Conservative MPs who are leading the bids, are absolutely focused on ensuring we deliver on reopening Meir station and the Stoke to Leek line. It is vital that we invest in improving our local transport—our vital local rail, road and bus links. Where the autumn statement delivers, rewarding work and putting more money in people’s pockets, so the cancellation of phase 2 of HS2 must deliver transport improvements to help communities in Stoke-on-Trent and across north Staffordshire to better access work and skills opportunities. That investment will put the money that was going to be wasted on phase 2 into things that will make a real difference, ensuring that we connect communities and deliver access to employment opportunities. That will deliver the step change that we need in local rail, road and bus connections. That is vital for communities like Meir in my constituency and right across Stoke-on-Trent and north Staffordshire.

Together, these measures will unleash employment growth and help us to level ourselves back up to where we belong, supporting our fantastic, world-leading industries—our manufacturing industries, on which our city was built—ensuring that we can deliver growth in jobs and employment, ensuring that work is rewarded through improvements in pay and conditions, and ensuring that people have access to better employment opportunities in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As I still have to get 16 speakers in, I shall have to reduce the speaking time limit to six minutes.

8.10 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): There is much in the autumn statement on which I could comment, but I want to focus on one area. Having heard what was said by my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), I was tempted to say the same, for I shall be touching on very similar themes.

Like many people, I hear regularly from disabled constituents who are desperately worried about their finances and their benefits. They feel that DWP assessments are designed to catch them out rather than help them, when it is appropriate, into good employment. For them, the autumn statement has been a source of great anxiety, with fears that the Government are doubling down on a culture that many have experienced as inflexible, ineffective, and even downright callous. Debra, a constituent who contacted me this weekend, has been on PIP and ESA for a long time, owing to a debilitating lifelong illness, and is now desperately worried that she will find herself in difficult circumstances as a result of the changes. There is an urgent need for the Government to clarify the details and put more flesh on the bones so that constituents like Debra are not worried sick about what will happen to them in the future.

Of course people who are able to work should be provided with the right support to help them to do so, because, as my right hon. Friend said, a job can be a source of structure and self-esteem, and people with mental health problems in particular are especially sensitive to the negative effects of unemployment. Crucially, however, as we have also heard, these jobs need to be good and appropriate. Insecure, demanding and low-paid work can be as bad for a person's mental health as unemployment.

Last week, during a television interview, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said that disabled people must "do their duty" and work from home, but figures from the Office for National Statistics show that only 16% of adults currently work exclusively from home in any given week, and that people are more likely to be able to work from home if they are in the highest income band and educated to degree level or above—groups to which people who suffer severely from mental illness, for example, are statistically less likely to belong.

I fear that disabled people competing for a small pool of fully remote jobs will find themselves pushed even further into poor-quality and insecure work. For others, particularly those with mental health problems, there is a risk that being pushed into homeworking will only serve to compound their social isolation and their difficulty in paying bills. We must be clear about the fact that while we need to provide better access to remote working, it cannot be a substitute for access to good-quality, hands-on support.

I want to say something about sanctions, because there is a well-established link between losing benefits, facing serious hardship and experiencing a deterioration in mental health, sometimes causing hospital admission. Previous research has established that people who are sanctioned also take longer to move into paid work, and that when they do, their earnings are lower. We need

a holistic approach that covers the impact of the colossal NHS waiting lists—in particular those for mental health treatment, which are preventing many people from being able to work. We cannot ignore that fact when considering this issue. We need to consider the impact of young people's experiences of education and living in poverty, and how they accumulate to exclude them from access to good jobs.

Along with mental health charities, I welcome the extension of the NHS individual placement and support scheme to provide intensive employment support for people with severe mental health problems, but I hope that the Government will consider the merits of that approach for more common mental health conditions, as well as taking a broader view of the factors that impede employment among people with poor mental health. Sadly, as we have heard, we did not see any new proposals for evidence-based preventive programmes, and I am particularly disappointed that we did not see the continuation of the vital funding to support local suicide prevention plans that is set to run out this year. As we have also heard, the cost of retaining that vital service is very small. The need for a public health approach to mental health has never been greater, and we need the Government to assess and show an understanding of the traumas that people have experienced, rather than creating new ones.

Finally, I want to say a little about childcare. Having spoken to staff at a nursery in my constituency, I know there is a real fear that the Government's plans are not meeting the costs that are needed to provide high-quality childcare, and something must be done about that.

The Tories are desperately looking for a reset moment, but it is not the autumn statement.

8.16 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As someone who spent many years in business myself, I will begin there. We started our family business back in 1991 with an enterprise allowance of £40 a week from the Government. It is not possible to make business risk-free, but it is possible to create the conditions that support entrepreneurs. SMEs are the real wealth creators of our economy, and in this, the week leading up to small business Saturday, I am proud to support those in my constituency. Microbusinesses, with up to nine employees, constitute 89% of the businesses in my constituency. These are the people who get up early in the morning, put in the hard yards, and take risks with their money. They are the backbone of local economies.

I welcome the measures in the autumn statement that back British business, such as the extension of rates relief for the hospitality, leisure and retail sectors. Freezing alcohol duty will help the local micropubs, such as The Turtles Head, that are the heart and soul of so many communities. Measures on class 2 and class 4 national insurance contributions to help the self-employed are also welcome. However, we need to continue to look at ways in which to go further. The extension of full expensing will be welcomed by the larger companies, but I fear that it will make little difference to too many small businesses. That is why I feel that we need a cut in corporation tax from its current high rate of 26% to its former level of 19%. That, I think, would be another tool to lead us towards the growth that we all want to see.

The increase in the national living wage will be greatly welcomed by many employees, but some businesses and community organisations in my constituency tell me of the challenges that it will pose to them. For some, it will risk pushing up prices to service users. I therefore urge the Government to exercise a bit of caution, and to continue to look at that balance.

As for personal taxation, I welcome the 2% cut in the main rate of employee national insurance from 6 January next year, which will bring relief to some 27 million workers, but I think we should recognise that we must not stop there. With wages rising, there is a real risk that people will pay more income tax. Let us not forget about the need to go on looking at the tax-free allowance thresholds—and I, for one, will be continuing to push for increases. I feel that that makes sense, because we need to address the fiscal drag.

Turning to welfare reform, the commitment to the triple lock will mean a fantastic 8.5% increase from the start of April 2024, which is equivalent to £900 a year. I know that that will help the pensioners in my constituency, and that is good news. The plan to work is also welcome. It is just not fair for the majority of British people to work while some people think they can get away without working. The key to employment is the Government working with training providers, education providers and employers, with everyone working closely together to understand where the skills gaps are today and where they are likely to be in the future. Our young people, our students and those returning to work later in life need a pathway of apprenticeships and education that will lead them smoothly and successfully into a job.

In the west midlands, we are fortunate to have our brilliant Mayor, Andy Street, who absolutely understands that. The announcement of three new investment zones, including one in the west midlands, is especially welcome, providing the opportunity to drive £5.5 billion of growth across our region and creating 30,000 new jobs. The autumn statement also seals the deal on the single settlement to provide the deeper devolution deal that we want and to end what has been described as a begging-bowl culture for so many devolved areas. That settlement has been pioneered by our west midlands Mayor, Andy Street.

The decision to invest a further £50 million in apprenticeship pilot schemes will be invaluable too. I note that the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), is nodding on the Front Bench, and I remind him that he is welcome to come to Aldridge-Brownhills to visit our apprenticeship provider. It is important that we do not neglect the traditional industries, which still provide an economic powerhouse in places such as the Black Country. We cannot afford to leave those communities and businesses behind. Our ambition of levelling up will be fully realised only when we embrace all sectors of industry, whether new or traditional.

The focus on supply-side reform is also much needed to deliver growth, particularly in areas such as planning, but I caution Ministers that, while that is welcome, we must ensure that our local authorities have the planning expertise and capacity to deal with the applications. I also ask Ministers to consider extending any such new policy practices to other organisations—for example, the Environment Agency. We have a situation in my constituency where it is taking up to 71 weeks just to

validate permits and licences, so I am rather hoping that someone on the Front Bench or in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will have taken note of that and will come back to me on it.

In a time of continued global uncertainty, especially given the war in Ukraine, I welcome our commitment to spending 2% of our GDP on defence. I also welcome the extra commitment of £10 million to support the Veterans' Places, Pathways and People programme. We have moved the dial forward, and I am sure we will continue to move it further forward.

8.22 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): It is difficult to know whether what we had last week was an autumn statement or a pre-election mini-Budget. It was big on promises and very optimistic, but the growth figures are disappointing and inflation is falling slowly—very slowly. The Chancellor says he is putting money in people's pockets, despite the Bank of England wanting us to spend less. He has agreed to freeze the small business rates multiplier for another year, but the increase in the minimum wage, though welcome for employees, will largely offset any benefits that businesses gain from the rates freeze.

Claire, the enterprising woman who runs Aspire, a hair and beauty treatment business in my Selly Oak constituency, has told me that this will mean gaining on business rates but losing on wage increases. Claire—who, through her own efforts and determination, has opened not one but two shops and held her business together during the pandemic by sheer hard work and creative advertising on social media—does not begrudge her 15 staff a wage increase. She acknowledges that they need it, but despite working all the hours she can, she has to accept less for her and her family because she cannot increase prices; otherwise, she will shrink her customer base, because they are all struggling with the cost of living crisis.

The Chancellor wants to be seen as promoting growth and cutting taxes, yet the tax burden is at its highest since the second world war, living standards are set to fall 3.5% below pre-pandemic levels—the worst reduction since the 1950s—and growth is at 0.6% compared with 2.1% in the United States, 2.5% in Spain, 2.3% in Portugal, 2% in Ireland and 1% in France. It is also hard to reconcile the image of tax-cutting Tories with the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecast that 4 million people are going to end up paying more tax due to fiscal drag. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, no Parliament has presided over larger tax increases since the 1950s. Who would have expected nurses and police inspectors to be paying the top rate of tax? They are hardly wealthy.

The Chancellor claims that he has reduced the debt. He has; it is now a mere £2.7 trillion and projected to be about 98.6% of GDP and not the 100% that he feared. But even this wonderful feat has only been achieved by sleight of hand, as he has excluded Bank of England debt from his figures. The much-vaunted national insurance reduction of £450 pales into insignificance when set against monthly rises in mortgage payments of £300 or more. Higher interest rates, and therefore higher mortgage repayments, are expected to hit around 4 million families. Against this harsh reality, it turns out that the Chancellor is barely giving working people enough back to be able to afford a weekly portion of fish and chips.

[Steve McCabe]

There are also too many households with nothing put away for a rainy day. Our savings ratio is lower than competitors such as Germany and France, and mortgage payment increases are estimated to take the number of households with no savings to around 7 million. That is one in four UK households. And where was the update on the energy social tariff, promised in last year's autumn statement? It turns out that not even the consultation has taken place, so this winter people relying on medical devices will have to make a choice. Many of those with disabilities and with conditions that react badly to the cold will suffer as they struggle with higher bills.

The Chancellor's big offer for businesses is full expensing, in what he called the largest tax cut for businesses in modern history. For every £1 million a business invests, it will get £250,000 off its tax bill in the same year. Alas, it is hard to find any estimate of just how many businesses will benefit. Can the Minister say just how many companies he expects to replace £1 million-worth of plant and machinery in a single year? Even those that do benefit will still suffer due to corporation tax.

For many businesses, the rise in the minimum wage will be accompanied by a 6.7% increase in business rates, adding to the pressure on them at a time when supplies, raw materials and other costs are increasing but their prices are not, all of which puts pressure on jobs. I have yet to come across a company in my constituency that appears to qualify for any energy support from this Government. It does not matter if it is the excellent Howard Yarnold, a family firm that specialises in the design, manufacture and fitting of commercial and domestic windows, Loaf, the popular organic bakery, or Aspire, which I have mentioned—nobody gets any help. If this was a plan for jobs and enterprise, it has failed.

8.28 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Before beginning my critique, I would like to welcome some of the Chancellor's announcements. First, I welcome the decision to maintain the benefits calculation based on September's inflation figure. Considering that energy and food prices are still rising, it would have been callous to change policy, as was briefed beforehand. I also welcome the increase in the minimum wage for those on the lowest wages and the unfreezing of the local housing allowance, albeit I read over the weekend that the unfreezing is only a temporary measure.

On moving those on disability benefits back to work via home employment opportunities, I agree that, if these opportunities exist, we need to help people by offering tailored support. In my view, these reforms would have fitted better within a wider Government strategy to promote homeworking.

I also welcome the extension to business investment relief. The UK faces chronic, long-term productivity challenges, and a key part of addressing them is encouraging businesses to invest for the future. Regrettably, this was not complemented by extra support for public investment. There was no increase in the Government's capital budget, which has been frozen at a pathetic 1% of GDP. Surely this has to be increased to address our productivity challenges, with the investment targeted at those parts of the UK that have historically underperformed.

The Resolution Foundation estimates that the UK's approach to public investment represents "an institutional failure of the British state".

It says that, had the UK followed the OECD average over the last two decades, an extra £500 billion would have been pumped into the UK economy, resulting in long-term economic benefits.

In the autumn statement, the Government claimed credit for halving inflation since its peak, thereby meeting one of their self-proclaimed key priorities for this year. Inflation at over 4% means that prices are still rising, of course—they are just rising at a slower rate. This means that, next year, energy costs are forecast to be around twice as high as they were before the price spike. I am disappointed that there was nothing in the autumn statement to help the most vulnerable with their bills. With higher energy prices, the Treasury is raking in extra revenue from VAT. Surely some of that revenue could have been used to provide a scheme to help those in dire need.

Furthermore, the OBR report indicates that inflation will remain higher for longer than predicted in its March forecast. As the OBR states, the assumption is that interest rates will remain higher than forecast, at a time when the central bank estimates that over half the impact of the rate rises over the past two years has yet to be felt. The OBR report indicates that economic growth will be slower than even its March forecast, with GDP growth estimated to be only 0.6% this year and 0.7% next year. It states that cumulative real growth from 2023 to 2027 will be 2.4% lower than forecast in March.

The OBR's revised figures on real household disposable income indicate that living standards will fall at the fastest rate since records began in the 1950s. Living standards will not recover to the pre-pandemic level until 2027-28. The Resolution Foundation estimates that the average worker will be £1,900 worse off in real terms at the end of this Parliament compared with the start.

The real income of the average worker lags way behind the OECD average. Whereas the OECD average for real wage growth between the financial meltdown in 2008 and 2023 was a measly 8.8%, the UK is firmly in the relegation zone at only 2.7%. Such has been the weakness of wage growth that the Resolution Foundation estimates that the average worker is £11,000 per annum worse off after 15 years of wage stagnation, following the financial crash of 2008, compared with pre-2008 trends.

The proverbial rabbit in the hat was the higher-than-expected two percentage point cut to national insurance. This comes at a cost of £46.8 billion per annum over the forecasting period, according to the Treasury's figures. However, the Chancellor did not comment on the impact of freezing income tax allowances and thresholds, which has resulted in a tax bonanza for the Treasury as a result of so-called fiscal drag. If my understanding of the OBR report is correct, fiscal drag will result in more than £201 billion of extra revenue for the Treasury over the next six financial years. That is the economic equivalent of nabbing the electorate's wallet and expecting them to be grateful that a fiver has been placed in their pocket.

Once again, the OBR report highlighted the harm that Brexit has caused to the economy. It found that long-term trade intensity will be reduced by 15% as a

result of the UK Government's decision to operate outside the European economic frameworks. Meanwhile, it also found that the flagship post-Brexit trade agreement, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership, will add only 0.04% to GDP in the long run. Despite this major elephant in the room, we face an election in which no UK political party is willing to entertain the one obvious economic move that could be taken to improve matters for the country, namely reintegrating economically as much as possible with the rest of our continent.

The political debate between the parties in this place has completely converged on the economy. As we face an election, the obvious question is where will future growth come from? Public investment is at historically low levels, exports are struggling as a result of a kamikaze Brexit, and consumer spending is likely to remain suppressed as living standards decline. In this environment, it is a bit far-fetched to expect business investment to step up and fill the void. I wish the official Opposition well when they inherit the mess in front of us.

8.34 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): As ever, it is a privilege to speak on behalf of the people in my community of Pontypridd and Taff Ely in today's autumn statement debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, on a storming speech at the Dispatch Box this afternoon and thank her for sharing the inspirational story about the challenge faced by David's son in trying to access employment. People with neurodiversity have an abundance of skills to contribute to our economy and to the workplace, but they need a proper pathway and a proper plan for suitable work for everyone. David and I have something in common: not only are we exasperated by this Government, but we are both parents to children with autism. Although my son is not going to be entering the workplace any time soon, I hope that he does so under a Labour Government here in Westminster, so that he, like everyone, has the opportunities and aspirations to achieve a decent world of work.

To be frank, the feeling in Pontypridd is crystal clear: the Government's plan simply is not working. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have promised to get the economy growing, but instead it is flatlining. Working people and households have been hit with rising prices for their food and utilities, and the Government should be ashamed that so many people across the country can no longer afford the basics. Leadership starts at the top, but the Prime Minister seems to be more concerned about securing his future employment and appeasing the likes of billionaires such as Elon Musk than supporting ordinary working people across Britain. Only the Labour party is serious about growing the economy. It is clear to see that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) is utterly determined to make working people in all parts of the country better off by growing the economy, boosting wages and bringing down bills. Let's face it: this Government cannot even get the basics right.

Labour's better-off plan will cut household bills by up to £3,000 a year over the next decade. I am proud that it is this party, on these Benches, that has a clear path forward. It is the absolute least that people across

the UK deserve after far too many years of false promises and distraction from this Government. Over the next decade, Labour's better-off plan will save families £500 a year by insulating homes to make them more energy efficient. People will also save £900 a year as we build cheaper, cleaner power across the country through the creation of Great British Energy, a new, publicly owned clean generation company. For homeowners, £1,200 a year on mortgage bills will be saved by our building 1.5 million homes over a Parliament to keep housing affordable.

The Chancellor's top lines, well-rehearsed as they are, simply cannot conceal the truth, because it is crystal clear that this Government have presided over 13 years of economic failure. When I speak to people across my area, the message is crystal clear: enough is enough. Colleagues on the Benches opposite must know the reality; rats and sinking ships come to mind. Economic growth has been revised down for next year, the year after and the year after that. None of the Chancellor's announcements will come as any form of compensation to undo the damage done by a flailing economy. We all saw it with our own eyes and felt it in our own pockets. The Conservative party oversaw the near collapse of the entire British economy last year, which was a disaster for businesses and individuals. Only Labour can be trusted on the economy and we have a plan from day one. That includes supporting our high streets, which have been utterly neglected at the hands of this Government.

I have repeatedly warned in this place of my frustrations over the closure of banks on the high street. Last week, yet another high street bank announced that it is shutting its doors and abandoning customers in Pontypridd. This time it is NatWest, but over the last few years HSBC, Lloyds and Barclays have all shut up shop too. The Chancellor claims that his plans will put more money in people's pockets. How ironic will it be if the banks continue to disappear and access to cash becomes a thing of the past? In my maiden speech, I said how proud we were in Pontypridd to have the Royal Mint in our constituency. It is not lost on me that my constituency makes all of the coins in the country yet we see far too little investment or money in people's pockets. So I urge the Government to think carefully about the desperate position in which this is putting people who require access to face-to-face banking services and access to cash. What plans do this Government have to compel banks to do the right thing and stay on our high streets to support businesses and vulnerable people who rely on their services? We have supported the banks and they should support us. My fear is that there is no plan.

Let us be clear: people across the country deserve so much better. We have an unelected Prime Minister and unelected Foreign Secretary, and manifesto commitments broken and abandoned one after another. Is it any wonder that people in the country are crying out for change. It is clear among the people up and down this country that they want a general election—they need a general election. They cannot afford any more years of this Tory Government. It is time for serious change, because this Government have played hard and fast with people's finances for far too long and we are all paying the price. Enough is enough.

8.39 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who made a powerful speech about her constituency. I share her frustration about bank closures on high streets. Like many Members across the Chamber, I have experienced the disaster of bank closures and the way that affects constituents' ability to access their banks. It should not be like that—our high streets need investment and should be invested in.

The autumn statement should improve our economy and, most importantly, tackle the cost of living crisis, but it simply does not do that. The Government seem unaware that growth has been downgraded for the next three years. This will be the biggest tax-raising Parliament on record and we have seen the biggest hit to living standards on record. Local authorities continue to be on their knees in public service provision. Although I welcome the announcements to honour the triple lock in the state pension and to raise benefits in line with September inflation figures, I have significant concerns about many areas of the statement.

I am concerned about aspects of Government policy around getting people back into work. Dr Roger Barker, director of policy at the Institute of Directors, states:

"We would like to have seen more substantive measures to address the problem of skills shortages, which continue to be a problem for our members."

It seems as if the Government are ignoring skills shortages that prevent people from moving from one job to another, or into certain jobs altogether. Many people are asking what will happen to those people who are penalised and whether people with disabilities will be disproportionately affected, as that is not clear.

Because of time constraints, I will focus on NHS waiting lists. Surely it makes sense to invest in getting people well and back to work, so they can be free from pain, able to function and do their desired job. There are a shocking 7.8 million people on NHS waiting lists and 2.6 million people are out of work because of long-term sickness, so surely it makes sense to focus on investing in the NHS—that cannot be said enough.

If the Government are serious about getting people into work, I ask them, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sickle cell and thalassemia, to focus on sickle cell. It is the UK's most common and fastest growing genetic disorder, yet one of the least researched. I encourage the Government to invest in research into sickle cell, which historically has had less investment compared with many other conditions. I ask the Government to call for dedicated sickle cell research by the National Institute for Health and Care Research and other UK research institutes.

Constituents who are in work often email me to say that once they have paid their rent and their energy bills, they do not have enough to meet their basic needs. Before coming to this place, I set up the Whitefoot and Downham Community Food Plus Project, which tackles food poverty. Although it is a success, foodbanks should not be a norm in our society. However, I feel they have become an acceptable norm to the Government, although not to Members on the Opposition Benches. We demand that people have the right to food. People need to be able to choose and buy food, but they also need to pay for fuel, rent and mortgages. These are the priorities of many of my residents.

Labour has a plan to cut household bills by up to £3,000 a year over the next decade. Labour is the party to take people out of poverty and to ensure everyone is better off. It is time for a general election.

8.43 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) and for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones). They both made powerful speeches about the importance of getting this country back on the right track.

Last week, in what I hope will be the final autumn statement of this out-of-date Conservative Government, the Chancellor lifted the lid on 13 years of Conservative economic failure. My constituents in Newport West and people across the country were told to expect an autumn statement for growth, but instead, as my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd said, growth has been revised down next year, the year after and the year after that. Indeed, the UK economy would now be £150 billion bigger if it had continued to grow at the same rate as when Labour was in power up until 2010. Rather than delivering a plan for growth and a plan to properly get our country back on track, we were left with the full scale of the damage that this Government have done to our economy over 13 years. Nothing that was announced in the autumn statement will remotely compensate for the pain and suffering my constituents have had to endure.

A constituent wrote to me last week:

"I am a student midwife and a single mum. I live in my parents' house as I cannot afford to rent a house in the current market. We actually spend some nights in my converted van. As you can imagine, living with your parents aged 42 with a child is difficult."

She goes on to say:

"I have friends on benefits who would love to train as nurses or midwives, but they are afraid of being financially disabled, so stuck in a vicious cycle of low-paid jobs claiming benefits. It is like the Tory Government want people to be unskilled and poor instead of thriving and skilled. I would love to be part of that change."

That is what she said to me. This is exactly what we need: a Government who invest in and upskill our people; a Government who do not walk by on the other side; and a Government who care.

After 13 years of the Conservatives, the economy simply is not working. Debt as a proportion of GDP will be 28% higher next year than it was when the Tories came to power. Worse than that, debt is forecast to surpass £3 trillion for the first time ever. I look forward to seeing that achievement writ large on the side of the Tory campaign bus when the election comes.

The people of Newport West know that this 13-and-a-half-year-old Government are presiding over the biggest tax-raising Parliament on record. Measures announced by the Chancellor last week are equivalent to handing back £1 for every £8 of the rise in tax since 2019-20.

With the freeze in the personal tax allowance threshold, a couple on an average wage will still be £350 worse off per year, even after the autumn statement. The freezing of tax thresholds, or "fiscal drag", is set to raise £44.6 billion by 2028-29, with nearly 4 million more people paying income tax and 3 million more paying the higher rate.

We know that the Conservatives are the party of high taxes, low investment and no growth, and we will not let them forget it. Despite all the promises made by

Lord Cameron, and every Prime Minister who has come after him, working people up and down this country are still worse off. The number of emergency food parcels distributed by Trussell Trust food banks has shamefully increased in Newport West. I pay tribute to all the volunteers who give their time to ensure that those in need do have some food on their table. In 2018, the total number of parcels distributed between April and September was 1,971. In the same period this year, it is 3,041. More and more people in Newport West are desperate for help and more and more people need a Government in Westminster who will actually get things done for them.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have said it before and I will say it again, this Prime Minister and his friends have let down the people of Newport West, of Wales and of our United Kingdom. The only way—the best way—to change course, to deliver for our people and to move forward is with a Labour Government, and the sooner the better.

8.47 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): In his autumn statement last week, the Chancellor announced plans to compel people living with long-term physical and mental health conditions and disabilities to find work, and to increase sanction penalties, which the Government have said will involve people losing access to free NHS prescriptions and legal aid. Claimants who do not find a job within 18 months will be forced to undergo mandatory work placements, while those failing to comply with the rules face having their benefits cut. The Chancellor said that the work capability assessment—the test used to determine whether someone is “fit for work”—will be reformed to reflect the availability of homeworking.

This situation is both cruel and distressing. We should be asking what more needs to be done to support our most vulnerable members of society, not seeing how harshly we can penalise them. The Disability Benefits Consortium, a national coalition of more than 100 charities, described the plan as a

“cynical attack on disability benefits that will have a devastating impact on those on the lowest incomes”.

Just one in 10 jobs advertised this year has offered homeworking as an option, while access to support, which might help to keep people in work for longer, including mental health support and social care, is already strained and absolutely cut to ribbons. The reality is that the Chancellor last week set out a plan that will ramp up sanctions and further demonise disabled people. Dr Sarah Hughes, the chief executive of Mind, said in response to the autumn statement:

“The reality is that the vast majority of people with mental health problems want to work but are consistently let down by poor support across the board...the UK government must urgently rethink these plans.”

I fully support those views, and those expressed by Disability Rights UK, an organisation run by and for disabled people, which responded to the Chancellor's plans by saying:

“For the past few months there has been a seemingly relentless attack on vulnerable, long-term sick and Disabled people on benefits...For Disabled and vulnerable people benefits are essential to survive financially. The fact is that for many people, benefits is their sole income because work is not an option. For those who could and want to work vague threats around the removal of

benefits, removal of free prescriptions and sanctions if not accepting the first job offered are not helping, in fact they are causing those already in the throes of long-term ill health and lifelong disability to suffer worsening health issues.

The benefits system is the fault here, not the recipient. The UN special rapporteur on poverty and human rights said in 2018 that the UK benefits system could be branded ‘cruel and inhuman’...calling cuts to the welfare system ‘ideological’ and ‘tragic’.”

A famous quote from Gandhi comes to mind:

“The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.”

Tragically, once again the Government do not come close to measuring up. Once again, they are using the benefit system to target and humiliate the country's most vulnerable people. Last week, the political editor of the *Liverpool Echo*, Liam Thorp, wrote:

“The images of the emaciated body of six-stone Stephen Smith, a desperately unwell man who was denied vital benefits before his tragic death, left an indelible mark on my mind and the minds of many others. Stephen was one of many victims of a cruel, government-led culture that targets the vulnerable and punishes those in our society who need support.”

At six stone, Stephen won his tribunal with the help of the much-missed Terry Craven against the Department for Work and Pensions, on its decision to declare him fit for work and deny him vital benefits. Stephen was the victim of a cruel welfare system. As the Government plan their latest attack on claimants, they show that they have learned absolutely nothing from his tragic death.

8.51 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): I will make some brief remarks on the tone of the autumn statement and the expectations that it creates in contrast with the reality that so many face at home in Selby and Ainsty.

First, on wages and personal taxation, the Chancellor appears bullish that a 2% cut to national insurance or a £1-an-hour increase in the minimum wage is enough for a nurse in South Milford, a shop worker in Selby or a teacher in Riccall, but local people in my constituency need only look at their bank balances, mortgage rates or receipts at the till to see how empty those supposedly generous promises are. A £1-an-hour minimum wage increase will not touch the sides for families when food inflation remains at 10%. Parents will keep putting items back on the shelf at the supermarket, and shoplifting for staples such as baby formula will continue to rise—formula for which, incidentally, the price has risen by 45% in the past two years. A 2% increase in national insurance amounts to little when the Government have already implemented tax rises equivalent to a 10% NI increase since the last election.

The Government have presided over the largest fall in living standards since records began, and this is the first Parliament in modern British history where people will be worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. In the face of that damning context, the Government should come clean about the fact that their announcements will do little to offset the high-tax, high-interest-rate, high-inflation economic reality that the Conservative party has created.

Secondly, we should, it appears, be grateful for the hard choices that the Chancellor has made to create the headroom for these measures—as if decreasing inflation had been achieved by the party that wilfully endorsed the catastrophic mini-Budget of the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) last year, and

[Keir Mather]

not by the efforts of the Bank of England and the economic sacrifice of mortgage holders across Selby and Ainsty, and across the rest of our country.

The deeper point is that these tax cuts are not pain free. Instead, they will be financed by baking in an era of austerity that the Resolution Foundation has called “implausible”. This is an irresponsible Chancellor, dodging the hard choices and leaving a future Government to foot the bill. He said that

“borrowing is just a deferred tax on future generations.”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 328.]

However, I need not remind one of the architects of the austerity agenda that spending cuts that are too deep will drain Britain of its productive capacity, continue to stifle growth, and cause the poorest in our society to suffer. Once again it will be my generation who are forced to pay the price for this decade of Tory recklessness.

The Secretary of State has announced that we are leaning into an era of “compassionate” government as a result of this autumn statement, so I turn to the work capability assessment and the reforms that will, in the words of an executive member of the charity Scope, “ramp up sanctions and demonise disabled people.”

The Government have an obligation to solve the long-term labour shortages and economic inactivity that prevent economic growth. Instead, their reforms amount to little more than a transparent gimmick that will punish the most vulnerable in society while the Government do too little to address the sky-high waiting lists that hold back our labour market.

Despite their claims to be the voice of change, this autumn statement shows that we are dealing with the same old Conservatives. People in Selby and Ainsty pay more to get less, and the most vulnerable suffer along the way. My hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor said it best when she asked whether people would

“feel better off after 13 years of Conservative Government”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 342.]

and another piecemeal autumn statement. The answer, for mortgage holders, business owners, young families, doctors, nurses, teachers and all those who rely on our public services, is a resounding no. As ever, we repeat the call for this Government to call a general election to deliver the Labour Government that the people of Selby and Ainsty so desperately need.

8.55 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Deputy Speaker. In response to the statement last week, Mark Drakeford, the Welsh First Minister, said that

“we urgently needed long-term investment in our public services and growth in our economy”.

He was right. This statement delivers some of the last gasps of the Tory Government. As has already been said, the Chancellor talked about growth, but the OBR has revised down its growth estimate. The Chancellor also talked about cutting inflation, but again the OBR says it will remain higher for longer.

Growth is stalling because investment is falling. We need to generate an even more ambitious proposal for public investment. With departmental budgets losing

value across the board thanks to inflation, our public services are being decimated. The OBR has identified this period as

“the largest reduction in real living standards since ONS records began”.

This autumn statement means that the people living through a cost of living crisis will continue to struggle and suffer: 14 million people living in poverty, including 4 million children, 10 million people going hungry and 6 million people living in fuel poverty. It is shameful that in the fifth-richest nation in the world there are so many millions of people suffering.

On welfare reform, I have, like others, been inundated with constituents who are struggling because of the inadequacies of the current social security system. One lady said that her family found the assessment and reassessment processes complicated, intrusive, degrading and unfair. The family are appealing a decision to refuse a renewal application, and the entire experience has caused extreme stress, anxiety and financial hardship. That is just one example of people failed by a process that is completely not fit for purpose, and the further conditions and sanctions announced will make it far worse. As someone who worked for many years in welfare benefits advice, I can assure hon. Members that nobody chooses not to work—and shame on those on the Government side who made comments to that effect. It is simply not the case.

On public services, as my old council leader, Andrew Morgan, said last week, local services in south Wales are “on their knees”, as they are elsewhere throughout the country. Local authorities are struggling with falling revenue and the inability to provide vital services, and we are seeing increasing community agitation against service cuts during the worst cost of living crisis in living memory. Those cuts are the responsibility solely of this Tory Government.

In my Cynon Valley constituency and the area served by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, there are protests against food price rises and council service closures and outsourcing. People are seeking alternative answers and models for increasingly difficult questions. People in our community, I am pleased to say, want to look at alternatives such as community wealth building, by which we would generate and retain wealth within our own community—it is called cymunedoli, or communisation. I assure the House that I will continue to work alongside constituents to organise for the change that we need.

Wealth generated in Wales has been extracted from our country since the industrial revolution, so I will continue challenging the dogmatic neoliberal economic approach taken by this Tory Government. Sadly for Wales, the purse strings remain here in Westminster, and Wales is still being exploited. The UK has failed to fund making coal tips safe, has failed to fund our HS2 consequential, and has failed in the levelling-up agenda. We need a proper, fair, needs-based settlement for Wales. Across the UK, we need public investment, decent public services and pay restoration for public servants, and we need to scrap sanctions on social security. We must stop investing in fossil fuels; otherwise, we will accelerate the climate catastrophe. We need to increase Treasury revenue to fund that change through progressive wealth taxes, including inheritance, land and property taxes.

In my home of Cynon valley and the south Wales valley, we have a strong history of being at the forefront of change and of working-class organisation and struggle. We are organising again, and we demand to be treated fairly and with respect. We can, and we will, deliver change for our communities. We deserve better, and our future generations deserve a future.

9.2 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Errol Graham starved to death in his own home. When his body was found, he weighed just 4½ stone. Errol was a grandfather. He was disabled and suffered from severe mental ill-health. He lived alone in his flat, where, at the time of his death, he had no hot water, no heating and no income for food and utilities. A few months before he died, Errol's out-of-work and housing benefits were stopped. Reviews into Errol's death criticised the Department for Work and Pensions for its handling of his case and found that the authorities repeatedly missed opportunities to help him.

Errol's death was utterly tragic, but it was not unavoidable or isolated. A BBC investigation found that since 2012, 82 people have died after alleged DWP activity such as the termination of social security support. The lives of disabled people across the country are made more difficult, more insecure and more beset by fear and anxiety because of the cruel and callous policies enacted by Conservative Governments. I highlight that because a central feature of this autumn statement is a renewed assault on the rights of sick and disabled people. That assault ranges from the threat of totally withdrawing disabled people's out-of-work benefits if they cannot find work after 18 months to new sanctions that could see people losing access to free NHS prescriptions and legal aid. Rather than demonstrating that damning lessons of past DWP failures have been learned, those policies are recipes for more tragedies and more people dying alone in desperate need.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) highlighted earlier in the debate, that scapegoating comes on the back of the Government's desperate attempts to demonise other marginalised groups—none more so than migrants and refugees. In both instances, the Government are playing divide and rule. They say that the problem with our public services is not school budgets being slashed, NHS funding cuts or privatisation; instead, they tell the British public that their problem is the migrant next door or the disabled person down the road. The intent is the same: to distract and divide, even if it means punishing the poor and vulnerable, and heaping misery upon misery.

It is little wonder that the Government are doing so now: as the Office for Budget Responsibility has made clear, Britain faces the biggest hit to living standards since records began. The outlook is set to get worse, with the OBR highlighting that this autumn statement bakes in a new round of austerity cuts. The real value of Government departmental spending is set to be slashed by nearly £20 billion by 2028.

Behind those cuts, and behind the demonisation of the poor and marginalised, is a myth that pervades our politics: the myth that there is not enough to go round. It is true that there is not enough to go round for ordinary people, as our constituents know too well.

Millions of people are struggling to make ends meet. More than 14 million people are living below the poverty line, including more than 4 million children, and last year the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that 3.8 million people experienced destitution. That is defined as severe poverty, where people cannot afford basic needs—that does not mean just struggling to pay the bills and keep food on the table, but choosing between heating and eating, a choice that becomes more and more painful as winter bites.

While the majority of people are struggling to make ends meet, it is simply a myth that there is not enough to go round, because last year, for example, the wealth of Britain's billionaires grew by more than £30 billion, up to nearly £700 billion. I will break that down: that is seven followed by 11 zeroes. That obscene wealth is matched by the profits of some of the biggest companies in the country, from the four biggest banks—Lloyds, Barclays, HSBC and NatWest, which saw pre-tax profits rocket by 79% this year—to the likes of Amazon, which saw global profits nearly triple this year to around £8 billion. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the brave workers at Amazon's Coventry warehouse, who became the first in UK history to go on strike after they were offered a pay rise worth just 35p. I was proud to join them again on the picket line on Friday in that company's biggest ever global strike.

What is true of Amazon is true of society as a whole: the problem is not that there is not enough wealth, but that the super-rich are hoarding all the wealth, and that can be tackled. An annual wealth tax of just 1.5% on assets over £10 million, for example, would raise £12 billion a year. Equalising capital gains tax with income tax rates would raise another £15 billion a year, and ending the non-dom tax break for the super-rich would raise a further £3 billion a year. That is money we could use to invest in our communities, to reverse 13 years of austerity, and to build a social security system that treats sick and disabled people with the dignity and respect they deserve. It could do everything from funding universal free school meals and ending the cruel two-child limit to properly funding our schools and hospitals, rebuilding collapsing infrastructure and giving hope to everyone in every corner of this country. This failed Tory Government will never do that, so it must be the mission of the next Labour Government.

9.7 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): As the 562nd woman to be elected to this place, I welcome the hon. Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards), who is the 563rd and also another Sarah.

This Conservative Government have left families to struggle, without access to vital health services and with food inflation at 10%, while trying to manage sky-high mortgage repayments. The Government's response is to claim to cut taxes while taking £45 billion a year through frozen thresholds and stealth tax hikes, and punishing those who are too sick to work or are unable to afford vital medical treatment. My constituents across Somerton and Frome have told me that they want access to three things: dentists, GPs and pharmacies. This autumn statement will do nothing to resolve the national crises that those essential health services are facing. The Government seem unable to understand that a healthy economy needs a healthy population, and both those things require a healthy NHS.

[Sarah Dyke]

I am unsure whether this Government are aware of just how bad things are in rural Somerset. Our dentist services are in decay: in 2022, only 38% of adults in Somerset were able to access a dentist in the previous two years. That statistic is no surprise, given that there is only one dentist delivering NHS services for every 1,773 people in the county. Many dentists in Somerton and Frome tell me they are closing their lists, and there are no NHS dentists currently taking on new adult patients. On the doorsteps, I meet more and more people who, shockingly, have turned to DIY dentistry out of desperation. The Government should have heeded Liberal Democrat calls to begin to address this crisis, because access to dentistry is an essential part of healthcare, not a cosmetic benefit.

According to the Resolution Foundation, going into the autumn statement the Chancellor had fiscal headroom for additional spending worth an extra £13 billion a year. The Liberal Democrats would have used that windfall to tackle the NHS crisis and end DIY dentistry and the dental deserts we now see across Somerset, giving people the quality care they deserve and allowing more people to return to work to grow our economy. Instead, the Government are slashing the NHS budget by £5 billion next year.

My constituents are also unable to access GP services. A constituent has recently informed me that they contacted their GP regarding severe inner ear pain, but they were unable to get an appointment with their local GP. This forced them to seek expensive private treatment for something that, if left untreated, would have had a detrimental impact on their quality of life. Another constituent struggled to get an appointment to look at a hernia, but after waiting in pain for weeks, they were forced to go private. They were then diagnosed with an incarcerated hernia—a condition that can be life-threatening if left untreated.

The number of GPs in Somerset has declined by 59 since December 2016, and a fully qualified GP in Somerset now has 2,157 patients. However, this is not isolated just to Somerset. People living in South Cambridgeshire, for example, are also feeling the acute effects of a lack of GP services. Here, there is one fully qualified GP for every 2,420 patients, which is 120 more patients per fully qualified GP than the England average. The Liberal Democrats would have used the extra £13 billion to deliver 8,000 more GPs and create 65 million more appointments every year.

Finally, pharmacies play a vital role in rural areas. Pharmacists are qualified clinical professionals who help remove some of the immense burden on hospitals and GPs, yet the Government continue to treat them as an afterthought. We are about to see a pharmacy in Wincanton close, which will only increase pressures and force residents to travel further to access a pharmacy. Community pharmacies are facing financial pressures and a recruitment crisis. We need to ensure their viability and sustainability nationwide. The Liberal Democrats would provide urgent emergency funding to keep pharmacies open and reverse closures, alongside providing pharmacies with greater prescribing rights to ease pressures on GPs.

Instead of investing in our NHS, growing the economy and helping people with the cost of living crisis, all the Conservatives have to offer is more chaos and

mismanagement. The Liberal Democrats have a long-term plan for the NHS, but this Government either do not get it, or they simply do not care.

9.13 pm

Michael Shanks (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): I want to start where a number of my hon. Friends have in this debate, which is talking about community facilities that are filling gaps where the Government are failing. A few weeks ago, I visited a fantastic community resource in Burnbank in Hamilton in my constituency, which is providing emergency food parcels, but also doing a lot to support people back into work through things such as improving IT skills so people can improve their CVs. Far from the image that the Government might like to give about people not in work, they are doing everything they can to find employment, and the least the Government could have done last week was to meet them halfway.

There are a number of things in the autumn statement that I do support. The increase in the minimum wage, however it has been rebranded, is welcome, although it has not kept pace with the real living wage, which means that the wages of many of the lowest earners are still not keeping up with their costs. I welcome the commitment to uprate benefits by the September rate of CPI, although since that is the convention anyway I am not sure the Chancellor deserves any applause for it.

The reality is that a year on from the ill-fated mini-Budget we have a Government engaged in smoke and mirrors, giving out with pre-election frenzy what they have taken away tenfold before. We have a Government who claim to improve living standards while the OBR finds the complete opposite: the largest reduction in living standards since records began in the 1950s.

Perhaps most damaging of all, the rates of poverty and destitution in the UK are forecast to go up, not down. That in itself is a damning indictment of any Government, and I confess that I struggle to comprehend it. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reveals that a staggering 3.8 million people experienced destitution last year, more than double the figure in the last five years—and, most shamefully of all, that figure includes 1 million children. The social security system, our great collective invention to provide the cradle-to-grave support that people need when they need it most, is not touching the sides of this crisis. Some 72% of those destitute were in receipt of benefits.

One of the most affected groups is those with a disability and chronic health problem; some 63% of people experiencing destitution fit into that category. I will focus my remarks on that group, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am the trustee of two charities working with people with disabilities.

Alongside the failure to provide the kind of boost to living standards that would have made a real difference, the Chancellor sought to use his autumn statement to demonise those with long-term conditions who rely on benefits. On work capability assessments, the removal of the mobility descriptor will mean those with severe mobility issues being placed in the limited capability for work group, meaning they will receive less support every month and be expected to prepare for work they might simply not be able to do.

Disabled people have enormous potential and, as many of my hon. Friends have said, I do not think anyone would suggest that those who are able to get into work should not be given the support to do so, but the key is to understand the support they need. The Multiple Sclerosis Society recently highlighted the issue of workplaces not providing the reasonable adjustments necessary to provide for flexible working. I recently spoke to a person in my constituency who has very severe epilepsy. Resistant to most epilepsy medication, if he has a seizure he requires emergency medication and for a number of days afterwards is completely exhausted. For people with such neurological conditions there is not a uniform pattern of health issues; they change from day to day and week to week. The holistic support provided to people to get into work must reflect that.

Much of what the Chancellor said seems to be predicated on the assumption that the world of work has changed since the pandemic and that everybody is somehow now able to work from home, but I would be curious to know what evidence he has to base that on. What proportion of current job vacancies are listed as home-based, and what proportion have flexible working arrangements? Disabled people predominantly occupy lower-paid jobs and, as a number of colleagues have said, most vacancies for homeworking tend to be in the higher pay band and higher-qualified sectors.

It is clear that the Chancellor's lack of understanding of disabled people's real lived experience means this patronising side note in the autumn statement will do real damage. Charities have lined up to criticise it as stigmatising, with the assumption yet again that disabled people do not want to work and are somehow a drain on our economy. A constituent with spina bifida who does fantastic work on integration with refugee communities in Glasgow has had cuts to her benefits and care package, meaning she might not be able to continue in work any longer. She put it very well, saying she

"feels like a cost, a negative on a balance sheet not a person with abilities and aims in life."

We need to reframe this whole conversation.

When considering the autumn statement in the round, we must look at these specific measures that are not doing anywhere near enough to lift people out of poverty. For a particular group of people who are most likely to experience destitution, not only will the autumn statement not make their lives better, but it will actively make them more difficult. That should never be the aim of a Government, and I hope this will lead to a rethink on some of the specific measures outlined last week.

9.19 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): The Chancellor's autumn statement is yet another assault on the poor, long-term sick and disabled—one that is both deadly and economically illiterate. Thirteen years of Conservative policies have caused untold misery for the poor, and especially for disabled people, and have been linked to hundreds of thousands of excess deaths. A University of Glasgow study last year found that more than 330,000 excess deaths were the result of austerity, and that austerity had not just halted the decades-long increase in UK life expectancy, but thrown it into complete reverse, especially among poor people. Rather than respond to the appalling effects of those policies by

changing course, the Government are now intensifying their attack on the poor, sick and disabled, scapegoating and demonising them for the Government's failure to grow the economy.

This country already has by far the worst out-of-work benefits of any comparable European nation and one of the harshest conditionality regimes, yet the Chancellor will now punish claimants for not engaging with state-sanctioned coercive therapy while the Government usurp the role of medical experts in deciding who is fit for work. Capitalism and oppression rely on the exploitation of human labour, and it seems that not even the exploitation of disabled people's labour is off the table in the competitive drive to accumulate even more wealth for the rich. People's wellbeing is a secondary concern for capitalism, and oppression through vicious sanction is the necessary corollary.

The escalation of the already punitive sanctions regime will see the working class, including the long-term sick, cut off even from support with healthcare. The awful consequences of those moves are not hard to predict, especially for those with long-term complex health conditions or disabilities, or those suffering poor mental health.

As long ago as 2014, NHS data showed that more than four in 10 people claiming out-of-work disability benefits—more than double the figure from the previous survey—had attempted suicide because of the punishing and attritional fit-for-work regime. Under successive Conservative Governments, the treatment of disabled people has been so horrific that the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities condemned the UK for creating "a human catastrophe". To the shame of this Government, the UK has 14 million people in poverty, well over 4 million of them children. Children from families with a disabled or long-term sick member are more than twice as likely to live in poverty. That figure was measured before the impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

The Government claim that the sanctions they intend to apply in cutting off universal credit to the poor will not be applied to those with children or to people with disabilities, but medical professionals and disability campaigners point out that, based on the Government's track record, the new regime will clearly be used to legitimise discrimination against people with chronic illnesses or disabilities. That is unequivocally against the European convention on human rights, but also fundamentally counterproductive.

As economists have pointed out, it is overwhelmingly clear that if we want to grow the economy, we need to redistribute wealth, invest in communities and put more money into the pockets of the poor, the working classes and the worst-off, because they will spend it locally and increase economic activity. Instead, the Chancellor has announced tax cuts for the wealthy and for corporations—money that will end up in offshore bank accounts, where it does nothing for our economy. This latest assault on the poor and disabled will do the opposite of what the Chancellor claims to be trying to achieve.

Our country desperately needs politicians who put physical, emotional and economic health above an ideological commitment to helping the rich and hitting the poor, the sick and the disabled. Tragically for the millions of struggling poor people in this country, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister are again doing

[Claudia Webbe]

the opposite of what they need. The Government's proposals are part of an ideological attack on the working class. The Chancellor's statement betrays those who most need help. It is simply unfit for purpose.

9.25 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The autumn statement may have been intended as something of a pre-election sweetener, but for most people in Wales it has a bitter taste. The intended big news was, of course, the tax cuts and, in Wales as elsewhere, a few small persuaders for some favoured Tory marginals—but not for others, as we will see at the next election. The reality is the biggest drop in living standards since records began and, as we have heard, the highest tax burden since the second world war. The Chancellor's speech gave little relief and even less hope to Welsh households and leaves our public services in an even more desperate condition.

On Thursday, we will no doubt hear right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches making a great deal of the intended cut to national insurance. I look forward to hearing at least one of them also noting that tax thresholds have been frozen, pushing 4 million low-paid workers into income tax and 3 million people into a higher tax band, which strikes me as something of an own goal for the Conservative party at the next election. The wholly predictable regional truth is that the national insurance cut predominantly favours London and the south-east, where it offers an average gain of £316 annually, while those in Wales, for example, stand to gain £211. That amplifies rather than relieves Wales's economic plight.

Our public services continue to wither without the investment needed. Buses, railways, healthcare, sustainable energy and other such initiatives in Wales are desperate for proper funding, yet the projections for departmental budgets show a £19 billion cut. We have been through many years of crisis, yet our economy is not prepared for the shocks of the future—an ageing population, higher Government debt, higher interest rates, energy insecurity and, of course, climate change—because we are seeing the consequences of failure to act over 13 long years.

A report published today by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit finds that, due to the combination of energy cost and climate change impacts across 2022 and 2023, household food bills have increased by an average of £605. Climate costs account for 60% of that—£361 per household.

Wales desperately needs to break from the economic doom loop caused by chronic short-termism. The autumn statement tightened the trap of short-term thinking. It is a cycle in which we are told that investment is not possible because we cannot afford it, but failure to invest weakens our economy even further.

Plaid Cymru has outlined fair and ambitious plans for Wales, which include replacing the Barnett formula with a funding system based on need. We would also devolve the Crown Estate to Wales, as has been done in Scotland, ensuring that the profits of our natural resources are invested back into our communities. But we also need practical help for the immediate cost of living pressures faced by ordinary people. For example, we ask for moderate measures to help with petrol and

diesel costs. Major supermarket fuel retailers are enjoying record profit margins by overcharging at the pumps, despite reduced wholesale fuel prices.

We called on the Chancellor to pressure the large fuel retailers to reduce prices when wholesale costs fall. The rural fuel duty relief scheme currently gives 5p relief to rural areas in England and Scotland. Extending it to Wales would have helped people in rural areas who are sadly reliant on cars due to our terrible public transport system, but the Chancellor chose not to act.

We urged the Government to address the severe geographical disparity in energy bill standing charges. Residents in Wales pay £80 more than Londoners every year, though we produce much more electricity than London. The stark inequality requires urgent action by the Treasury and further underlines the need for a fairer energy pricing system, including the development of a social tariff but, again, the Chancellor chose not to act.

Wales deserves more than empty promises. We are asking for—indeed, we are demanding—fairness, investment and a genuine commitment to rid our communities of poverty and the lack of opportunity. The autumn statement delivered none of that. It is further proof to us that London-based economic policymaking will never work in the interests of Wales.

9.32 pm

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Last week, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer set out his autumn statement, there was much anticipation about what kind of rabbit would be pulled out of the hat. Despite the Chancellor's upbeat delivery, the performance was less Harry Potter magic and more Paul Daniels-style trickery.

Almost all of the Government's financial headroom—the amount they have left over after their commitments—was blown on a small tweak to national insurance contributions. The Chancellor lauded the changes, suggesting that they would save people hundreds of pounds every year, but he failed to mention that even with the changes, the average person will pay more in tax overall. I can see that the cost of covid must be paid for, but I object to the spinning of a larger tax burden as a smaller one. That is partly because the Chancellor continued a freeze on tax thresholds—the level at which our constituents start to pay tax. Higher inflation means that many more will be dragged into paying more tax, whether at the higher or the basic rate. That is giving with one hand while taking substantially more with the other. The Resolution Foundation has identified that under the plans, taxes will rise by the equivalent of £4,300 per household in the decade from 2019. Even by the end of this Parliament, it expects that households will be £1,900 worse off than at the beginning of it.

In Government, the Liberal Democrats delivered tax cuts for millions by doubling the amount someone could earn before they started paying tax. By contrast, this Conservative Government are one of the highest taxing Governments in history, allowing increasing numbers of low and middle-income earners to be dragged into paying ever increasing amounts of tax. It is simply not sustainable. We need more efficient spending of public money, with targeted investment, to ease the squeeze and save us money down the line. For example, of the £784 billion of taxpayer money that the UK Government spent last year, £39.3 billion was given to households as

an energy subsidy. It would not have been necessary to give away so much of that taxpayer money had Lord Cameron, as Prime Minister, not cut the “green crap”.

There were a couple of welcome measures in the statement. I was pleased to see the extension of the business rate discount, including for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, of which we have many excellent ones in my part of east Devon. The decision to keep the triple lock on pensions was also welcome, and ensures that pensions rise to match earnings, giving pensioners peace of mind and financial security. I called for that in Treasury questions less than a fortnight ago, so it is pleasing to see it rise in line with earnings at 8.5%. But the rest of the autumn statement was notable for what the Chancellor did not say. There was no additional money for the NHS or social care, despite the fact that the winter cold is already starting to set in. I am genuinely puzzled by that. It is a disastrous oversight that risks inflicting real challenges on our dedicated health professionals and our communities in the year ahead.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is lucky: like me, he represents a constituency in Devon. That means he knows how much people in Devon value our community hospitals. In my own corner of Devon, Seaton Community Hospital is at risk of having a whole ward of the facility stripped away to be sold off or even demolished. That is due to the continued squeeze on local healthcare budgets, with Devon NHS alone facing an almost £40 million shortfall. The Chancellor's statement did nothing to address that grim situation.

There was also a distinct lack of funding to help clean up our rivers and beaches. Because of the wayward activities of water companies and the fact that the Government have just left this issue to Ofwat, we are seeing huge levels of raw sewage put into our once pristine local rivers and beaches. That is harming biodiversity and putting the health of people and animals at risk. The scandal also pervades England's chalk streams. For example, those that empty into the River Itchen near Winchester contain unique biodiversity and ecosystems. Our sites of special scientific interest also see sewage dumping and ecological vandalism.

How would I sum up the autumn statement? Overall, it sums up the current Conservative Government: out of touch. Floundering for a buoyancy vest, their party ship continues to list and sink. Our communities deserve better. Devon deserves better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

9.36 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to close this debate, and the debate on the autumn statement as a whole, on behalf of the Opposition. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the new Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) for her excellent maiden speech and welcome her to the House, and to the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), for her comprehensive and damning opening on the Government's record.

I also pay a particular tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and express my condolences for the loss of his constituent. It is a

tragedy that he did not see justice from the Post Office Horizon scandal before he died, but I know that he and his family will be proud of the work that my right hon. Friend has done over many, many years to bring justice to those who have been affected.

More broadly, we have heard a range of excellent speeches, including from my hon. Friends the Members for Halton (Derek Twigg), for West Ham (Ms Brown), for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist), to name just a few who set out from their constituencies how, even though the Conservatives tell us things are doing alright, the lived reality for families across the country is anything but. We also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) about the amount of money the Government have wasted over many, many years, and what that could do to support people in constituencies across the country, including Blaydon, Lewisham East, Newport West, Liverpool, West Derby, Cynon Valley, Coventry South, and Rutherglen and Hamilton West. Lastly, we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) about 13 years of Conservative failure on the economy and the consequences for their constituents.

Over the course of the past few days of the debate—and noting, if I may say so, how few Conservative Members contributed to the debate today to defend the Government's record—it has been clear that we on the Labour Benches have the ideas and the energy to turn the economy around, while on the Conservative Benches, after 13 years of Conservative failure on the economy, it seems the Tory bandwagon has run out of fuel, leaving its Back Benchers arguing on the side of the road about who should be given the keys next while the real world moves on, leaving our country and the British people behind.

Let me now turn to the autumn statement itself. Well, what can I say, Madam Deputy Speaker? A fiction, a fantasy, a fallacy, an all-round F grade for an autumn statement that failed to deliver the change that our country needs. Even the independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out, with some surprise, that

“a lot of these numbers... are sort of made up.”

But it is worse than that, because the Conservatives want the public to believe in their financial folklore. When he announced his autumn statement last week, the Chancellor said:

“we are sticking to a plan that is working.”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 337.]

The plan is working? Really? We all know that, irrespective of which side of the House we sit on, if we asked our constituents, “What in this country is working right now?”, they would say “Absolutely nothing at all.” How strange, therefore, that this Conservative Government, who appear to be so lacking in vision for our country, can be so good at playing make-believe.

The Conservatives keep telling us that we have never had it so good—that everything is fine—but here in the real world, people have real problems: unaffordable food bills, unaffordable mortgage bills, unaffordable energy bills. Many Conservative Members seem to think those are not problems for working people across the country, but, remarkably, this is the first Parliament on record—the

[Darren Jones]

first Conservative Parliament—in which, by the end of the Conservatives' time in office, people and their living standards will have fallen, not improved. Those are the hard realities that people are facing.

We know why people are facing these financial pressures, and why living standards in the UK are falling. Irrespective of what we are told by Conservative Ministers, economic growth has been downgraded, not upgraded. The tax burden weighs heavier than ever, not lighter, and high inflation is lingering, not fleeting. On every measure on the dashboard of the UK economy, the red lights are flashing. The Conservatives would have us believe that tax is down when it is up, that the cost of living crisis has ended when energy bills are going up once again, and that this autumn statement will somehow stimulate economic growth when even the Governor of the Bank of England has said of growth that

“there's no doubt it's lower than it has been in much of my working life.”

The Tories want to spin a tale that the latest Conservative Prime Minister is the hero of the story, a real-life Robin Hood bringing tax cuts to help working people, but there are a few serious holes in that story. First, the Prime Minister is not new to the scene, but has played a prominent role in this Conservative Government for many years—a Conservative Government who have introduced 25 tax rises in this Parliament alone, and a further 12 Tory stealth taxes just in the autumn statement. Secondly, it is this Conservative Government who decided to put income tax and national insurance thresholds on ice, which means that millions of people are being dragged into paying more tax. Thirdly, as a consequence, the tax cuts are not cuts in real terms at all. The Conservatives' 25 tax rises have seen working people hand over an extra 10p in every pound they earn. So while I welcome the last week's announcement of a 2p cut in national insurance, I do so with a very slow clap.

Everyone at home knows that the Conservatives may be giving out a few hundred quid in the autumn statement with one hand, but they have already taken thousands of pounds more from us, each and every year, with the other. In real terms, low and middle-income earners will still be worse off than they were before the Conservatives came to power, and that is a shameful record of failure. The Prime Minister is not Robin Hood; rather he is the Sheriff of Nottingham, because never have we paid so much in taxes and had so little in return. People at home will rightly be asking, “What on earth am I paying for? I cannot get an appointment with the GP, and I cannot find a dentist. Why is my pay not keeping up with the cost of living? Why is my rent—or mortgage—so much more expensive than it was before the Conservatives crashed the economy, and why will my energy bills, I am told, start to go up again?”

The Chancellor may have announced 101 policies for growth, but after 13 years of Conservative failure it is just too little, too late. That is why we in the Labour Party are focused on economic growth. Only by getting the economy back on track will we make the British people better off again. While it is obvious that Labour is the party of good work for working people, we are now the party of business too—working in partnership to deliver the investment that the country needs, co-investing alongside business to deliver a more secure, cheaper

energy system, and unblocking the bottlenecks that prevent businesses from creating the good jobs that people want in the industries of the future.

The Prime Minister is hosting his global investment summit today, but we hear from investors and businesses week in, week out that it is all too late. Even IFM Investors, the Australian infrastructure investor which has pledged investment today, has said that “government dysfunction and inefficient planning processes” have meant that there are not many “attractive opportunities” left in the UK. The message could not be clearer.

The UK is at risk of relegation, and change is required. That is why my Friend the shadow Chancellor and I launched the British Infrastructure Council last week, and it is why my review on how we deliver major projects and infrastructure better in this country will set out how a Labour Government will get Britain building again. Alongside that laser focus on economic growth, built on the Labour party's bedrock of fiscal responsibility —[*Interruption.*] There is chuntering from the Conservative Benches, but people at home will remember one year ago when the Government crashed the economy and interest rates and mortgage rates went through the roof, and those people are still suffering with the cost of living crisis today. Let people at home look at Ministers on the Government Benches laughing when those people cannot afford to pay their bills. Let them look at Conservative Members and decide whether they want even more after 13 years of Conservative failure or whether, quite frankly, it is time for change.

Public services are one of those things that need to change. My work in what I hope will be a future Labour Government will also be focused on reforming our public services, which have been left on their knees after 13 years of the Conservatives. In his autumn statement, the Chancellor has shown that he would rather just throw what money he has left at a problem than roll up his sleeves. With the interest on our national debt costing the British public more than £112 billion this year alone, he clearly has a different idea to me of what it means to be fiscally responsible with our money. Last week, the Chancellor demanded that public services should be 0.5 % more productive each year for the next 10 years, but he did not say how.

Instead, I stand here with my colleagues in the Labour party ready to modernise our public services. If we win the next election, we will improve outcomes for people who rely on those public services, we will improve the quality of work for our public servants and we will get the public sector budget back under control, because the British people deserve better. In contrast, the Conservatives seem happy to ignore the waste and inefficiencies of their spending over these past 13 years. Why? Because the hard work of reforming our public services and our economy requires strong and accountable leadership, not fleeting changes between 13 Ministers in one Department, five Prime Ministers and so many more. This Conservative Government are not strong and accountable for delivering our public services. They are weak, weak, weak. The only answer to fixing the last 13 years of this Conservative Government is to close the book on their failure, to say goodbye to those last 13 years and to have a Labour Government who will unleash a decade of national renewal, so I ask the latest Conservative Prime Minister to do this country a favour and call an election.

9.47 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nigel Huddleston): Well, we have seen it, haven't we—the same old Labour, never knowingly missing an opportunity to talk the country down yet again. I will return to that theme in a moment because it is very serious. I am delighted, in my first debate in this House as Financial Secretary, that I get to offer the closing words in our debate on the autumn statement. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for opening today's debate. His speech was a compelling argument for the value of work. This is an autumn statement that is good for the businesses of this country and good for the people of this country. We know that the two things go hand in hand.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister referred to his colleague in the DWP. Earlier today, we heard one of his colleagues in the Home Office confirm that the Government had no intention of allowing asylum seekers to work to help pay the cost of their accommodation. How does it make sense to say that the way to stop a disabled person being a burden on the taxpayer is to force them to work when they are not fit to, but that the way to stop an asylum seeker being a burden on the taxpayer is to ban them from working even if there is a job they want to do?

Nigel Huddleston: The hon. Gentleman is missing the purpose of the reforms that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions clearly outlined earlier today. Perhaps if he had been in the Chamber, he could have listened to it directly.

When this Government came to power, we inherited not only higher unemployment from Labour, as always, but a lopsided welfare system that discouraged people from even seeking work. In the last 13 years, by reducing workless households, tackling low pay and reforming the welfare system, we have helped hundreds of thousands of families out of poverty. In the wake of covid-19, we have nearly 1 million vacancies in the economy, yet more than 7 million adults of working age, not including students, are still not working. Even Opposition Members seem to recognise that many of them want to work, and therefore we will be spending £1.3 billion over the next five years to help nearly 700,000 people with physical and mental health conditions to find jobs. And we will provide a further £1.3 billion of funding to offer extra help for the 300,000 people who have been unemployed for over a year, to help them find work.

The Government also recognise that, to get more people working, we must back business, as it is business that creates the jobs and pays the wages that lift up our communities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) articulated. We will help the households of this country by boosting business through a variety of measures outlined in the autumn statement. Of course, the much-asked-for full expensing will be pivotal. We are also providing £4.5 billion over five years to support strategic manufacturing sectors that already have, or can gain, a competitive edge, namely in aerospace, automotive, clean energy and life sciences, as mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) and others.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) mentioned, we are also supporting small businesses in this autumn statement.

For those smaller businesses that are so integral to their communities, we are freezing the small business multiplier and extending the 75% business rate support for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses for another year. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East and my hon. Friends the Members for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), and others, for highlighting the importance of the tourism sector, which they know I care passionately about.

We are also establishing new investment zones throughout the country that will generate billions of pounds of investment, as my hon. Friends the Members for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) highlighted.

There are other things we can do to ensure that work rewards workers, such as increasing their rate of pay and making sure they keep more of their earnings, which is exactly what we have done. We are abolishing class 2 national insurance contributions and cutting class 4 contributions. Alongside these cuts, we are raising the national living wage by 9.8% to £11.44 an hour and, of course, we are cutting the main rate of employee national insurance by two percentage points, giving a tax cut to 27 million workers. The Opposition may not appreciate that, but I assure them that their constituents do.

These measures will create work, get people into work and make sure that work is rewarding, as Conservative Members have recognised, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton).

Before briefly addressing some of the other points that have been raised, I take this opportunity to congratulate the new hon. Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) on her maiden speech. She started well by praising her constituents, which is always a good move, and I wish her well in this House.

The hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) mentioned R&D, and the Government will merge the existing R&D expenditure credit scheme and small and medium-sized enterprise scheme from April 2024. This will simplify and improve the system, helping to drive innovation in the UK economy. That message of simplification was also pushed by my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). These reforms represent an overall increase in support to R&D companies of around £200 million a year by 2028-29.

The hon. Member for Gordon also mentioned the Scotch whisky industry. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that his party's Members have singularly failed to support any one of the new trade deals that we have signed and are signing, despite the fact that they support every single nation and region of the United Kingdom and are transparently in the interests of their constituents.

Richard Thomson: Will the Minister give way?

Nigel Huddleston: No, the hon. Gentleman has had plenty of time. I hope he will support the CPTPP deal when it comes before the House.

I always support Scotch whisky, which is a success story that we should all champion. It is a £6 billion export industry, and we can all be proud that 51 bottles

[Nigel Huddleston]

of Scotch whisky are exported every second. Let us create more opportunities by supporting these trade deals.

The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) mentioned the UK tax gap, and she is absolutely right to highlight that important matter but, of course, she is well aware that the tax gap is on a long-term downward trend. We have one of the lowest tax gaps in the world. The tax gap was 7.5% under Labour, and it is now at a record low of 4.8%, which is something she forgot to mention.

Perhaps most importantly, there is the context in which we have made this autumn statement, as was mentioned by many hon. Members, particularly my right hon. Friends the Members for Wokingham (John Redwood) and for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), and my hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). I refer to the fact that we have faced difficult times, with not just one but two global shocks that have had an impact on, and reverberated around, the world. That meant that we were required, expected and proud to intervene in a way that we have not had to do since the second world war. The figures are astounding: more than £350 billion provided during the pandemic to make sure that we supported lives and livelihoods; and, in the light of the invasion of Ukraine, a further £100 billion of support to help those facing cost of living challenges, including our paying nearly half of people's energy bills last winter.

The Opposition seem to have a collective sense of amnesia about that; it is astounding that they do not understand that all of this money needs to be paid back. Their constituents, who are managing their finances every day, completely understand that you cannot spend money you do not have and if you get into debt, it needs to be paid off. Today, not only are the Opposition criticising us for high taxes, but their solution then seems to be spending even more. That is absolute economic incompetence and shows that they are completely unfit for office. The reality is that Conservatives increase taxes out of necessity and then reduce them out of choice, whereas the Labour party increases taxes out of necessity and out of choice. That is a fundamental difference between our parties, and therefore at the first opportunity we have had to reduce taxes, because the economic circumstances are better—how disappointing is good economic news for those on the Opposition Benches—and we are now in a better economic position, we are now reducing taxes.

Another important theme we have seen from those on the Opposition Benches is this utter pessimism and lack of confidence and faith in the UK economy. We are not pretending, for one minute, that everything is perfect; we know, as constituency MPs, that many people in our constituencies, right across the country, are suffering—we are all aware of that. However, constantly talking the UK down is not only incorrect, but bad for business and for the UK economy. I hope that the Opposition Members understand that when they are talking Britain down, they are talking workers, businesses and their constituencies down. Expectations and confidence matter, as they are what lead to investment in the UK. Because of the confidence in the UK economy, we saw

investment announced last week by Nissan, this very day we have the global investment summit taking place and we are seeing billions of pounds more of incremental investment coming into the UK. That is because other countries have confidence in the UK economy, as do Conservative Members. The Opposition are signalling that they do not, and that is a terrible signal to send to the world. Again, if you do not have confidence in the UK economy, you are not fit for office.

The Opposition are talking Britain down. We have seen a huge amount of incremental investment. The Opposition do not like to understand that, for example, we have the second highest level of foreign direct investment in the world, after only the US. Just recently, we have overtaken France and moved from being the ninth largest to the eighth largest manufacturing country in the world. Because of our exporting success, we have gone from being the sixth biggest to the fifth biggest exporter in the world, and we have the second largest export of services of any country in the world. The Opposition may not like those facts, but they are true and provide every reason why we are keen to talk Britain up.

Today, we have seen a positive debate and measures in the autumn statement that back both business and our citizens. From a platform of progress, this is an autumn statement for growth, which will bring jobs, opportunities and prosperity to every corner of the country. I commend the autumn statement to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That—

(1) In Schedule 1 to the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979 (table of rates of tobacco products duty), for the Table substitute—

“TABLE

Cigarettes	An amount equal to the higher of — (a) 16.5% of the retail price plus £316.70 per thousand cigarettes, or (b) £422.80 per thousand cigarettes.
Cigars	£395.03 per kilogram
Hand-rolling tobacco	£412.32 per kilogram
Other smoking tobacco and chewing tobacco	£173.68 per kilogram
Tobacco for heating	£325.53 per kilogram”.

(2) In consequence of the provision made by paragraph (1), in Schedule 2 to the Travellers' Allowances Order 1994 (which provides in certain circumstances for a simplified calculation of excise duty on goods brought into Great Britain) —

- in the entry relating to cigarettes, for “£393.45” substitute “£422.80”,
- in the entry relating to hand rolling tobacco, for “£351.03” substitute “£412.32”,
- in the entry relating to other smoking tobacco and chewing tobacco, for “£161.62” substitute “£173.68”,
- in the entry relating to cigars, for “£367.61” substitute “£395.03”,
- in the entry relating to cigarillos, for “£367.61” substitute “£395.03”, and
- in the entry relating to tobacco for heating, for “£90.88” substitute “£97.66”.

(3) The amendments made by this Resolution come into force at 6pm on 22 November 2023.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the motions made in the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Standing Order No. 51(3)).

2. CAPITAL ALLOWANCES (PERMANENT FULL EXPENSING ETC)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made amending section 7 of the Finance (No.2) Act 2023 so as to secure that the relief provided for in that section extends to expenditure incurred on or after 1 April 2026.

3. CORPORATION TAX (RELIEF FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made about relief from corporation tax (including by way of the payment of credits) in respect of expenditure on research and development.

4. CORPORATION TAX (FILMS, TELEVISION PROGRAMMES AND VIDEO GAMES)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made for the purposes of corporation tax about companies producing films, television programmes or video games, including provision for the payment of credits in respect of expenditure on the production of those things and a provision taking effect in a future year.

5. CORPORATION TAX (RELIEF FOR THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made—

- (a) amending section 1217GB of the Corporation Tax Act 2009, and
- (b) amending other provisions of Part 15C of that Act so as to limit or clarify the circumstances in which relief under that Part is available.

6. CORPORATION TAX (RELIEF FOR ORCHESTRAL CONCERTS)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made —

- (a) amending sections 1217QA and 1217RB of the Corporation Tax Act 2009, and
- (b) amending other provisions of Part 15D of that Act so as to limit or clarify the circumstances in which relief under that Part is available.

7. CORPORATION TAX (RELIEF FOR MUSEUM AND GALLERY EXHIBITIONS)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made —

- (a) amending section 1218ZCC of the Corporation Tax Act 2009, and
- (b) amending other provisions of Part 15E of that Act so as to limit or clarify the circumstances in which relief under that Part is available.

8. ADMINISTRATIVE PROVISIONS RELATING TO CREATIVE RELIEFS

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Schedule 18 to the Finance Act 1998 in relation to claims under any of Parts 15 to 15E of the Corporation Tax Act 2009.

9. REAL ESTATE INVESTMENT TRUSTS

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made amending—

- (a) sections 528 to 528ZB, 529, 535A, 544, 551, 553 and 606 of the Corporation Tax Act 2010, and
- (b) section 452 of the Taxation (International and Other Provisions) Act 2010.

10. TONNAGE TAX

Resolved,

That provision may be made—

- (a) applying tonnage tax to managers of ships, and
- (b) increasing the capital allowances limit for the leasing of ships.

11. EXTENSION OF EIS RELIEF AND VCT RELIEF

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made for EIS relief and VCT relief to be available in relation to shares issued after 5 April 2025.

12. RELIEF FOR PAYMENTS OF COMPENSATION TO COMPANIES (HORIZON ETC)

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made —

- (a) for relief from tax in the case of payments of compensation to companies in connection with the Horizon computer system used by, and other policies adopted by, Post Office Limited, and
- (b) conferring a power on the Treasury to provide for relief from tax in other cases involving payments of compensation to companies by or on behalf of public authorities.

13. ENTERPRISE MANAGEMENT INCENTIVES (TIME LIMITS)

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the time limits for the giving of notices of options and enquiries under Schedule 5 to the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003.

14. PENSIONS (PROVISION CONNECTED WITH ABOLITION OF LIFETIME ALLOWANCE CHARGE)

Resolved,

That provision may be made in consequence of, or otherwise in connection with, the provision made by sections 18,19 and 23 of the Finance (No.2) Act 2023.

15. PENSIONS (MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ETC)

Resolved,

That provision may be made in relation to pension schemes for Members of Parliament, Members of the Senedd and Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly in connection with exercises to be undertaken by those schemes for rectifying discrimination in the way in which benefits ceased to be determined by reference to a member's final salary.

16. INCOME TAX (CALCULATION OF PROFITS ON CASH BASIS)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for the purposes of income tax about the calculation of the profits of a trade, profession or vocation on the cash basis.

17. PAYE REGULATIONS (SPECIAL TYPES OF PAYER OR PAYEE)

Resolved,

That provision may be made enabling PAYE regulations to make provision (including provision having retrospective effect) in a case where —

- (a) a person would otherwise be liable to pay tax in consequence of being treated under section 61N(3) of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003 as having made a payment, and
- (b) tax has already been paid or assessed in respect of income referable to that payment.

18. CARER'S ALLOWANCE SUPPLEMENT (CORRECTION OF REFERENCE)

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made correcting the reference to the statutory provision in the entry for carer's allowance supplement in Table A in section 660 of the Income Tax (Earnings and Pensions) Act 2003.

19. STAMP DUTY RESERVE TAX (GROWTH MARKET EXEMPTION)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Section 99A of the Finance Act 1986 (meaning of "recognised growth market" etc) is amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (5) —

- (a) in the words before paragraph (a), after "recognised stock exchange" insert "or a qualifying UK multilateral trading facility";
- (b) in paragraph (a), for "£170 million" substitute "£450 million".

(3) In subsection (6), at the end insert ";

"UK multilateral trading facility" has the meaning given by Article 2.1.14A of Regulation (EU) No. 600/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 May 2014 on markets in financial instruments as it forms part of assimilated law."

(4) After subsection (6) insert—

"(6A) For the purposes of subsection (5) a UK multilateral trading facility is "qualifying" if—

- (a) it is operated by an investment firm within the meaning given by article 3(1) of The Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001 (S.I. 2001/544), and
- (b) the investment firm has permission under Part 4A of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 to carry on the regulated activity (within the meaning of that Act) of operating a multilateral trading facility."

(5) The amendments made by this Resolution come into force on 1 January 2024.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

20. STAMP DUTY (CAPITAL-RAISING ARRANGEMENTS ETC)

Resolved,

That the following provisions have effect for the period beginning with the day on which this Resolution is passed and ending 31 days after the earliest of the dates mentioned in section 50(2) of the Finance Act 1973 —

Depository receipts and clearance services

(1) The Finance Act 1986 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 67 (stamp duty: depository receipts) —

- (a) in the heading, at the end insert "1.5% charge";
- (b) in subsection (1) omit "(other than a bearer instrument)";
- (c) after that subsection insert—

"(1A) For the purposes of subsection (1) "instrument" does not include —

- (a) a bearer instrument (see subsection (9A));
- (b) an exempt capital-raising instrument (see section 72ZA);
- (c) an exempt listing instrument (see section 72ZB).";

(d) after subsection (9) insert—

"(9ZA) Where an instrument transfers shares in a company which are held by the company (whether in accordance with section 724 of the Companies Act 2006 (treasury shares) or otherwise), subsections (2) to (5) do not apply and stamp duty is not chargeable on the instrument."

(3) In section 69 (depository receipts: supplementary), in subsection (1), in the words before paragraph (a), for "sections 67 and 68 above" substitute "sections 67, 68 and 72ZB".

(4) In section 70 (stamp duty: clearance services) —

- (a) in the heading, at the end insert "1.5% charge";
- (b) in subsection (1) omit "(other than a bearer instrument)";
- (c) after that subsection insert—

"(1A) For the purposes of subsection (1) "instrument" does not include —

- (a) a bearer instrument (see subsection (9A));
- (b) an exempt capital-raising instrument (see section 72ZA);
- (c) an exempt listing instrument (see section 72ZB).";

(d) after subsection (9) insert—

"(9ZA) Where an instrument transfers shares in a company which are held by the company (whether in accordance with section 724 of the Companies Act 2006 (treasury shares) or otherwise), subsections (2) to (5) do not apply and stamp duty is not chargeable on the instrument."

(5) After section 72 (clearance services: supplementary) insert—

“Meaning of “exempt capital-raising instrument” and “exempt listing instrument”

72ZA Meaning of “exempt capital-raising instrument”

- (1) For the purposes of sections 67 and 70, an instrument is an “exempt capital-raising instrument” if the instrument transfers relevant securities in the course of capital-raising arrangements.
- (2) In this section, “capital-raising arrangements” means arrangements pursuant to which relevant securities are issued by a company for the purpose of raising new capital.
- (3) An instrument is not prevented from being an exempt capital-raising instrument by reason only of a delay in transferring relevant securities where—
 - (a) a person (“the transferor”) acquires the relevant securities —
 - (i) before capital-raising arrangements are entered into, or
 - (ii) in the course of capital-raising arrangements,
 - (b) the transferor is subject to a restriction that has the effect of preventing the transfer of the relevant securities in the course of the capital-raising arrangements, and
 - (c) the instrument transfers the relevant securities as soon as reasonably practicable after the time at which the restriction ceases to have effect.

72ZB Meaning of “exempt listing instrument”

- (1) For the purposes of sections 67 and 70, an instrument is an “exempt listing instrument” if—
 - (a) the instrument transfers relevant securities of a company in the course of qualifying listing arrangements, and
 - (b) those arrangements do not affect the beneficial ownership of the relevant securities.
- (2) In this section, “listing arrangements” means arrangements pursuant to which relevant securities, or depositary receipts for relevant securities, are listed on a recognised stock exchange.
- (3) For the purposes of this section, listing arrangements are “qualifying” if, immediately before the first transfer of relevant securities in the course of the listing arrangements, no relevant securities in the company or depositary receipts for relevant securities in the company are listed on the recognised stock exchange to which the listing arrangements relate.
- (4) An instrument is not prevented from being an exempt listing instrument by reason only of a delay in transferring relevant securities where —
 - (a) a person (“the transferor”) acquires the relevant securities before qualifying listing arrangements are entered into,
 - (b) the transferor is subject to a restriction that has the effect of preventing the transfer of the relevant securities in the course of the qualifying listing arrangements, and
 - (c) the instrument transfers the relevant securities as soon as reasonably practicable after the time at which the restriction ceases to have effect.
- (5) Section 1005 of the Income Tax Act 2007 (meaning of “recognised stock exchange”, “listed” etc) applies in relation to this section as it applies in relation to the Income Tax Acts.”

Bearer instruments

- (6) In section 79 of the Finance Act 1986 (stamp duty: loan capital: new provisions), in subsection (2) —
 - (a) omit “on the issue of an instrument which relates to loan capital or”;
 - (b) for “such an instrument” substitute “an instrument which relates to loan capital”.

- (7) Section 50 of the Finance Act 1987 (warrants to purchase Government stock etc) is amended as follows —
 - (a) in subsection (2) —
 - (i) omit paragraph (a);
 - (ii) in paragraph (b), for “such an instrument” substitute “an instrument which relates to an interest, right or option within subsection (1)”.
 - (b) in subsection (3) —
 - (i) omit paragraph (b);
 - (ii) in paragraph (c), for “under that Schedule” substitute “under Schedule 15 to the Finance Act 1999 (stamp duty: bearer instruments)”.
- (8) Schedule 15 to the Finance Act 1999 (stamp duty: bearer instruments) is amended as follows—
 - (a) omit paragraph 1 (charge on issue of instrument) and the italic heading before it;
 - (b) in paragraph 2 (charge on transfers of stock by means of instrument), in the words before paragraph (a) omit “duty was not chargeable under paragraph 1 on the issue of the instrument and”;
 - (c) in paragraph 4 (1.5% rate of duty) omit “or 6”;
 - (d) omit paragraph 7 (ascertainment of market value for charge on issue of instrument);
 - (e) in paragraph 17 (exemption for issue of instruments relating to non-sterling stock), in sub-paragraph (1) —
 - (i) in the words before paragraph (a) omit “the issue of”;
 - (ii) omit the words after paragraph (b);
 - (f) omit the italic heading before paragraph 21;
 - (g) omit paragraph 21 (procedure for stamping instruments where duty chargeable on issue);
 - (h) omit paragraph 22 (consequences of default in complying with procedure for stamping).

Commencement and transitional provision

- (9) The amendments made by this Resolution have effect in relation to instruments executed on or after 1 January 2024.
- (10) Paragraph (11) applies in relation to securities constituted by or transferable by means of an instrument issued before 1 January 2024.
- (11) The amendments made by paragraph (7) are to be disregarded.
- (12) Paragraph (13) applies in relation to bearer instruments issued before 1 January 2024—
 - (a) in the United Kingdom, or
 - (b) outside the United Kingdom by or on behalf of a UK company.
- (13) The amendment made by paragraph (8)(b) is to be disregarded.
- (14) In paragraph (12) “bearer instrument” and “UK company” have the same meaning as in Schedule 15 to the Finance Act 1999 (see paragraphs 3 and 11 of that Schedule).

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of section 50 of the Finance Act 1973.

21. STAMP DUTY RESERVE TAX (CAPITAL-RAISING ARRANGEMENTS ETC)

Resolved,
That—

Depositary receipts and clearance services

- (1) The Finance Act 1986 is amended as follows.

(2) Section 90 (section 87: other exceptions) is amended as follows—

- (a) in subsection (3C) —
 - (i) at the end of paragraph (a) insert “and”;
 - (ii) omit paragraph (b);
- (b) in subsection (3E) omit paragraph (b);
- (c) in subsection (4) —
 - (i) the words from “falling within” to the end become paragraph (a);
 - (ii) after that paragraph insert “, or
 - (b) which would fall within section 93(1) or section 96(1) if the references in section 93 or section 96 (as the case may be) to the transfer of chargeable securities included the issue of chargeable securities.”

(3) In the italic heading before section 93 (SDRT: depositary receipts), at the end insert “: depositary receipts”.

(4) In section 93 —

- (a) in the heading, at the end insert 1.5% charge”;
- (b) in subsection (1) —
 - (i) in the words before paragraph (a) omit “Subject to subsection (7) below and section 95 below.”;
 - (ii) in paragraph (b) omit “or issued”;
- (c) after that subsection insert—

“(1A) The following provisions contain exceptions to the charge to stamp duty reserve tax under this section —

 - (a) subsection (7) of this section (exception so far as stamp duty is chargeable);
 - (b) section 95 (general exceptions);
 - (c) section 95A (replacement securities);
 - (d) section 97AB (exempt capital-raising transfers);
 - (e) section 97AC (exempt listing transfers);
 - (f) section 97AD (exception for transfers of shares held by issuing company);
 - (g) section 97B (transfers between depositary receipt system and clearance system).”;
- (d) in subsection (4) omit paragraph (a);
- (e) omit subsection (10).

(5) In section 94 (depositary receipts: supplementary), in subsection (1), in the words before paragraph (a), for “section 93 above” substitute “sections 93 and 97AC”.

(6) In section 95 (depositary receipts: exceptions) —

- (a) in subsection (1), in the words after paragraph (b) omit “subject to section 97C.”;
- (b) in subsection (2), in the words before paragraph (a) omit “, issue”;
- (c) omit subsections (3) to (5);
- (d) omit subsection (7).

(7) In section 95A (depositary receipts: exception for replacement securities) —

- (a) in subsection (1) omit “, issue”;
- (b) in subsection (3) —
 - (i) in paragraph (a), in the words before subparagraph (i) omit “, issue”;
 - (ii) in paragraph (b) omit “or (3)”;
- (c) in subsection (4), in paragraph (a) omit issued”.

(8) Before section 96 (SDRT: clearance services) insert —

“Other charges: clearance services”.

(9) In section 96 —

- (a) in the heading, at the end insert 1.5% charge”;
- (b) in subsection (1) —
 - (i) in the words before paragraph (a) omit “Subject to subsection (5) below and sections 97 and 97A below.”;
 - (ii) in paragraph (b) omit “or issued”;

(c) after that subsection insert—

“(1A) The following provisions contain exceptions to the charge to stamp duty reserve tax under this section —

- (a) subsection (5) of this section (exception so far as stamp duty is chargeable);
- (b) section 97 (general exceptions);
- (c) section 97ZA (exception for replacement securities);
- (d) section 97A (election for alternative system of charge);
- (e) section 97AB (exempt capital-raising transfers);
- (f) section 97AC (exempt listing transfers);
- (g) section 97AD (exception for transfers of shares held by issuing company);
- (h) section 97B (transfers between depositary receipt system and clearance system).”;
- (d) in subsection (2) omit paragraph (a);
- (e) omit subsection (8).

(10) Section 97 (clearance services: exceptions) is amended as follows —

- (a) in subsection (1), in the words after paragraph (b) omit “subject to section 97C.”;
- (b) in subsection (3), in the words before paragraph (a) omit “or issue”;
- (c) omit subsections (4) to (6).

(11) Section 97AA (clearance services: further exception) is renumbered section 97ZA.

(12) In that section—

- (a) in the heading, for “further exception” substitute “exception for replacement securities”;
- (b) in subsection (1) omit “or issue”;
- (c) in subsection (3) —
 - (i) in paragraph (a), in the words before subparagraph (i) omit “or issue”;
 - (ii) in paragraph (b) omit “or (4)”;
- (d) in subsection (4), in paragraph (a) omit “or issued”.

(13) Section 97A (clearance services: election for alternative system of charge) is amended as follows —

- (a) in subsection (3), in paragraph (a) omit “or issue”;
- (b) in subsection (4), in both places omit “, issue”.

(14) After section 97A insert—

*“Depositary receipts and clearance services:
further exceptions*

97AB Exempt capital-raising transfers

- (1) There is to be no charge to tax under section 93 or 96 in respect of an exempt capital-raising transfer.
- (2) For the purposes of subsection (1), a transfer of chargeable securities is an “exempt capital-raising transfer” if the transfer is in the course of capital-raising arrangements.
- (3) In this section, “capital-raising arrangements” means arrangements pursuant to which chargeable securities are issued by a company for the purpose of raising new capital.
- (4) A transfer of chargeable securities is not prevented from being an exempt capital-raising transfer by reason only of a delay in transferring the chargeable securities where—
 - (a) a person (“the transferor”) acquires the chargeable securities —
 - (i) before capital-raising arrangements are entered into, or
 - (ii) in the course of capital-raising arrangements,
 - (b) the transferor is subject to a restriction that has the effect of preventing the transfer of the chargeable securities in the course of the capital-raising arrangements, and

- (c) the transfer is made as soon as reasonably practicable after the time at which the restriction ceases to have effect.

97AC Exempt listing transfers

- (1) There is to be no charge to tax under section 93 or 96 in respect of an exempt listing transfer.
- (2) For the purposes of subsection (1), a transfer of chargeable securities issued by a company is an “exempt listing transfer” if—
- it is a transfer in the course of qualifying listing arrangements, and
 - those arrangements do not affect the beneficial ownership of the chargeable securities.
- (3) In this section, “listing arrangements” means arrangements pursuant to which chargeable securities, or depositary receipts for chargeable securities, are listed on a recognised stock exchange.
- (4) For the purposes of this section, listing arrangements are “qualifying” if, immediately before the first transfer of chargeable securities in the course of the listing arrangements, no chargeable securities in the company or depositary receipts for chargeable securities in the company are listed on the recognised stock exchange to which the listing arrangements relate.
- (5) A transfer of chargeable securities is not prevented from being an exempt listing transfer by reason only of a delay in transferring the chargeable securities where—
- a person (“the transferor”) acquires the chargeable securities before qualifying listing arrangements are entered into,
 - the transferor is subject to a restriction that has the effect of preventing the transfer of the chargeable securities in the course of the qualifying listing arrangements, and
 - the transfer is made as soon as reasonably practicable after the time at which the restriction ceases to have effect.
- (6) Section 1005 of the Income Tax Act 2007 (meaning of “recognised stock exchange”, “listed” etc) applies in relation to this section as it applies in relation to the Income Tax Acts.

97AD Exception for transfers of shares held by issuing company

There is to be no charge to tax under section 93 or 96 in respect of a transfer of shares in a company which are held by the company (whether in accordance with section 724 of the Companies Act 2006 (treasury shares) or otherwise.”

- (15) In section 97B (transfer between depositary receipt system and clearance system) omit subsection (1A).

- (16) Omit section 97C (transfers to non-EU depositary receipt and clearance services systems).

- (17) In section 99 (interpretation), in subsection (10), in the words before paragraph (a), for “97AA” substitute “97ZA”.

Commencement and transitional provision

- (18) The amendments made by this resolution have effect in relation to —

- agreements to transfer chargeable securities made on or after 1 January 2024;
- the transfer or issue of chargeable securities on or after that day.

- (19) Paragraph (20) applies in relation to UK bearer instruments within the meaning of section 99(1A) of the Finance Act 1986 issued before 1 January 2024.

- (20) The amendments made by paragraph (2)(a) and (b) are to be disregarded.

- (21) Paragraph (22) applies for the purposes of section 95A of the Finance Act 1986 (depositary receipts: exception for replacement securities) where the securities mentioned in subsection (3)(a) of that section were issued before 1 January 2024.

- (22) The amendments made by paragraphs (3), (4) and (7) are to be disregarded.

- (23) Paragraph (24) applies for the purposes of section 97ZA of the Finance Act 1986 (clearance services: exception for replacement securities) where the securities mentioned in subsection (3)(a) of that section were issued before 1 January 2024.

- (24) The amendments made by paragraphs (8), (9), (11) and (12) are to be disregarded.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

22. PILLAR TWO

Resolved,

That provision may be made—

- for the purpose of ensuring that changes (or anticipated changes) to the Pillar Two rules (within the meaning of Part 3 of the Finance (No.2) Act 2023) are taken into account in the provision made by Parts 3 and 4 of that Act and otherwise in connection with ensuring the consistency of those Parts with those rules, and
- about the treatment under those Parts of companies and other entities carrying on activities in connection with securitisations or risks associated with insurance.

23. RATES OF VEHICLE EXCISE DUTY (PASSENGER OR LIGHT GOODS VEHICLES, MOTORCYCLES ETC)

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the rates of vehicle excise duty in Parts 1 to 2 of schedule 1 to the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994.

24. RATES OF AIR PASSENGER DUTY

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the rates of air passenger duty.

25. HYDROCARBON OIL DUTIES (REBATE ON OILS USED FOR HEATING PREMISES)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for rebates on oils when used in machines or appliances for heating premises.

26. VEHICLE EXCISE DUTY (EXEMPTION FOR FOREIGN VEHICLES)

Resolved,

That provision may be made conferring a power on the Secretary of State to make provision (including provision having retrospective effect) for vehicles registered outside the United Kingdom to be exempt from vehicle excise duty.

27. INTERPRETING VAT AND EXCISE LAW

Resolved,

That—

- (1) This Resolution makes provision about how —

- the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (“EUWA 2018”), and

- (b) the amendments made to that Act by the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 (“REULA 2023”), are to apply for the purpose of interpreting enactments relating to value added tax or any duty of excise (“VAT and excise law”).

(2) Section 4 of EUWA 2018 (retained EU rights, powers, liabilities etc) continues to have effect (despite the provision made by section 2 of REULA 2023) for the purpose of interpreting VAT and excise law subject to the following exception.

(3) The exception is that Articles 110 and 111 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (which relate to internal taxation on products) have no effect for that purpose.

(4) Section 5(A1) to (A3) of EUWA 2018 (which are inserted by section 3 of REULA 2023 and which abolish the supremacy of EU law) have effect in relation to VAT and excise law as they have effect in relation to other domestic enactments but only so far as they relate to the disapplication or quashing of any enactment as a result of EU law (and, accordingly, the superseded provisions continue to have effect for the purpose of interpreting VAT and excise law).

(5) Retained general principles of EU law —

- (a) continue to be relevant (despite the provision made by section 4 of REULA 2023) for the purpose of interpreting VAT and excise law in the same way, and to the same extent, as they were relevant for that purpose before the coming into force of that section, but
- (b) otherwise have effect for that purpose subject to the provision made by that Act (including, in particular, the amendments made by section 6 of that Act (role of courts)).

(6) In this Resolution —

- (a) the reference to any duty of excise is to be read in accordance with section 49 of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018,
- (b) the reference to the superseded provisions is a reference to section 5(1) to (3) of EUWA 2018 as those subsections had effect immediately before the passing of REULA 2023, and
- (c) the reference to retained general principles of EU law is to be read in accordance with EUWA 2018 as that Act had effect immediately before the passing of REULA 2023.

(7) This Resolution needs to be read with sections 42 and 47 of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 (which make other provision about EU law relating to VAT and excise law and which continue to have effect for the purpose mentioned in paragraph (1) above).

(8) This Resolution comes into force on 1 January 2024.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

28. RATES OF LANDFILL TAX

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the rates of landfill tax.

29. RATE OF AGGREGATES LEVY

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the rate of aggregates levy.

30. RATE OF PLASTIC PACKAGING TAX

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the rate of plastic packaging tax.

31. INCREASING MAXIMUM TERM OF IMPRISONMENT FOR TAX OFFENCES

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing the maximum term of imprisonment for any offence under—

- (a) section 106A of the Taxes Management Act 1970 (fraudulent evasion of income tax),
- (b) section 72 of the Value Added Tax Act 1994 (fraudulent evasion etc of VAT),
- (c) any provision of the customs and excise Acts (within the meaning of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979), or
- (d) any other enactment relating to tax.

32. PROMOTERS OF TAX AVOIDANCE (ORDERS DISQUALIFYING COMPANY DIRECTORS ETC)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for officers of Revenue and Customs to apply for orders under the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986 in connection with the promotion of schemes and other arrangements involving tax avoidance.

33. PROMOTERS OF TAX AVOIDANCE (STOP NOTICES)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for cases in which a failure to comply with section 236B of the Finance Act 2014 constitutes a criminal offence.

34. CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY SCHEME

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the conditions for, and the grounds for cancelling, gross payment status under the construction industry scheme.

35. TAX RETURNS (INFORMATION)

Resolved,

That (notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills) provision may be made taking effect in a future year about—

- (a) the information to be provided in returns under the Taxes Management Act 1970, and
- (b) the information to be provided by employers in accordance with PAYE regulations.

36. COMMENCEMENT OF PROVISIONS RELATING TO PENALTIES

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the commencement of Schedules 24 to 27 to the Finance Act 2021.

37. INCIDENTAL OR CONSEQUENTIAL PROVISION

Resolved,

That provision (including provision having retrospective effect) may be made which is incidental to, or consequential on, provision authorised by any other Resolution.

FINANCE BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act of the present Session relating to finance, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

- (a) any expenditure incurred by the Commissioners for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in respect of credits to companies in respect of expenditure on research and development, and
- (b) any expenditure incurred by the Commissioners for His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in respect of credits to companies in respect of expenditure on the production of films, television programmes or video games.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Laura Trott, Bim Afolami, Gareth Davies and Nigel Huddleston bring in the Bill.

FINANCE BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Nigel Huddleston accordingly presented a Bill to make provision in connection with finance.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 14) with explanatory notes (Bill 14-EN).

Business without Debate**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 to 4 together.

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

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

That the draft Design Right, Artist's Resale Right and Copyright (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

That the draft Intellectual Property (Exhaustion of Rights) (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

That the draft Public Service Obligations in Transport Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Aaron Bell.*)

Question agreed to.

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

ENERGY

That the draft Green Gas Support Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Aaron Bell.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PUBLIC HEALTH

That the draft Health Protection (Coronavirus, Testing Requirements and Standards) (England) (Amendment and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2023, which were laid before this House on 16 October, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Aaron Bell.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the National Insurance Contributions (Reduction in Rates) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Aaron Bell.*)

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Ordered,

That Bob Blackman, Kevin Foster, Patricia Gibson, Chris Green, Nigel Mills, Wendy Morton and Kate Osborne be added to the Backbench Business Committee.—(*Rebecca Harris, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

HOME AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Paula Barker be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Kim Johnson be added.—(*Rebecca Harris, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Ordered,

That Mark Jenkinson be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Dr Lisa Cameron be added.—(*Rebecca Harris, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Post Office Services: Edinburgh West

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Aaron Bell.)

10.3 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The subject of the debate is post office services in Edinburgh West. Although it is about my constituency, the problem could just as easily apply to many constituencies throughout the country. Indeed, I have not spoken to a single Member who has not said that their constituency faces the same problem with post office closures as we face in Edinburgh West.

When I was thinking about the debate, I wondered what the answer might be if I asked any of the children in my constituency what a post office was and what they used it for. I also thought they might look at me with astonishment if I told them that what they now regard as part of the local shop was once the organisation that provided everything from our telephone services at home, our mail and all sorts of Government forms, to pensions and stamps.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this matter forward. Last week, the parliamentary group of the Democratic Unionist party met the Northern Ireland sub-postmasters association. Every one of those issues that she mentions were discussed with us. We were told that those opportunities were no longer available in the post office, by which I mean MOTs, car tax renewals, and passport renewals. The post office was also used as a community hub. All of those things highlight how important post offices were. I know that the hon. Lady has said all of that, so I hope that, in his response, the Minister can give us some succour and respite in relation to what the post offices can and should do.

Christine Jardine: The hon. Member makes a very good point. These were all vital services. Not so very long ago, post offices were central to communities up and down the country. They also provided some of the most spectacular examples of architecture, and they dominated our town centres. The local post office was where I applied for my first driving licence. I opened my first savings account there and queued for what seemed like hours every Christmas to make sure that the family's cards and presents went off safely to various parts of Australia and Canada—but not any more. The Post Office I grew up with in the 1960s had 25,000 branches. In 2021, that figure had more than halved to 11,415, with more than half of those listed as vulnerable. The organisation itself lost £597 million in the same year.

In Scotland we have the biggest problem in the UK, having lost more than 6% of our post offices in the past two years alone. In Edinburgh West, two have closed and one has been relocated to a different area in the past year. As I said earlier, this problem is not isolated to Scotland or to Edinburgh West. One third of rural post offices are now offered as part-time outreach services.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. This is a truly national problem, which unfortunately affects the whole of the UK. Indeed, there is also a related problem of postal deliveries not appearing on time, which is having a huge effect on many residents. I have had closures of post offices in my

constituency in Reading and Woodley, and also severe problems with residents not getting post on time, leading to people missing out on paying their bills and many other things.

Christine Jardine: That is a good point. The national service is being undermined. As the hon. Member mentioned, deliveries are not being made. Moreover, one third of rural post offices are now only part-time outreach services, open for an average of five and a half hours. It is not the service that we knew for many years and that communities are entitled to expect.

The irony of all this is that the Post Office still generates around £5 billion for the economy every year. In constituencies such as mine, which has lost 70% of its bank branches since 2015, we increasingly rely on the post office for banking services and so much more.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I would like to share with my hon. Friend a short quote from a letter that a constituent of mine wrote to me about the reduction of Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and other Government services at post office branches. He said:

“Having worked for the Insolvency Service, I am aware that there are many people who do not have bank accounts, are better able to manage their affairs using cash, or need the reassurance of a face-to-face transaction to avoid getting into difficulties.”

Does she agree with my constituent?

Christine Jardine: I most certainly do agree with my hon. Friend's constituent. Citizens Advice tells us that almost 20% of people still visit their post office weekly for one of the services that he mentioned. That increases to 23% of those in rural areas, 27% of carers, 22% of over-65s and 21% of disabled people, so there is a need in our communities. On the DVLA services that my hon. Friend mentioned, the contract with the Post Office ends in March next year. Currently, the Post Office handles more than 6 million DVLA transactions annually, which contributes £3.2 million per year to postmaster remuneration.

People rely on their post offices for all these services, yet we are seeing them fail because they do not have the support that they need from the Government. It is not worth their while; the postmasters who are closing in my constituency tell me that they do not have the support that they need. If we are to save what was once rightly claimed to be the front desk of Government in our communities from becoming an adjunct slotted into shops that are willing to put up with it, we need something to be done quickly.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): We have all heard the point about post offices being the front desk of Government, but at the same time we are told that Government services will be digital by default. Is not the root cause of the problem the lack of strategy that would stem from a coherent Government position?

Christine Jardine: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: there is no coherence to the Government's position. Digital services do not work for everybody. Not everybody wants them. As with so many of our public services—buses, trains, the NHS and water—we need a recognition that this issue needs action now. It needs investment, and better support for those who supply the services. The reality is that some people will not be able to lead their

lives as they would wish without the services that our post offices have traditionally offered, which are being undermined. Most do not want to; they enjoy the comfort of having a post office. They enjoy being able to pop in, particularly in rural communities, and buy their stamps, or collect their pensions.

This week, I was at my office in Edinburgh West. A gentleman stopped me in the street and asked me, ironically, whether I knew where the nearest post office was. Fortunately, I did. He had an A4 envelope in his hand. He said, "I need to get a stamp and post this, and I can't find one," so I directed him along the road. A post office is a simple thing, but they are vital to communities up and down the country. If the Minister, or the Prime Minister, has any doubts I would be more than happy to take them to a post office in Edinburgh West and introduce them to the many people who use the services that are still available—but I would quite like to do it while I still can, and while they are still there.

10.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) on securing this debate. She is right to say how highly valued post offices are to our communities, and to speak up for them in this debate. I promise her that I fully support her perspective, representing a rural constituency myself.

The network of roughly 11,500 branches around the UK that the hon. Member refers to is the largest retail network in the country. As she points out, a recent London Economics report pointed out how post offices not only have economic value in terms of the use of the post office itself—she referred to a gentleman with an envelope looking for a post office for a stamp—but benefit other local shops, cafés and other businesses on our high streets. The knock-on effect adds up to around £3.1 billion a year, according to that report, so we are fully aware of the importance of post offices to communities and to the economy.

I am very keen, and I have been since I took over as Minister for postal affairs about a year ago, among other duties relating to my brief, to challenge the Post Office to make sure that it is doing the right thing by postmasters. The hon. Lady quite rightly points to the level of remuneration that postmasters get. We have to get that right to make the whole network sustainable. I gently point out to her that the Post Office is a commercial business, so it is not something that I direct on a day-to-day basis, but I am keen to take forward challenges on behalf of Members on both sides of the House.

The hon. Lady is aware of the network criteria that 99% of the population must live within three miles of their nearest branch and that—this is relevant to her constituency—95% of the total urban population must live within one mile of their nearest outlet. The network actually is not in decline—more post offices opened than closed over the course of the past year—but we see fluctuations, and it is regrettable that Edinburgh West has seen closures in recent months. I know that is very disappointing for her and her constituents; we know how important the post office is for those communities.

Of course many postmasters are running franchise businesses in their own right, and many of the challenges that postmasters face are faced by many high street businesses. Consumer habits are changing the dynamic and the viability of some postmasters' businesses, and we need to find ways to make sure that they can run viable businesses that pay them fair remuneration for their work.

The hon. Lady and other hon. Members mentioned relationships such as that with the DVLA. That has been extended until the end of March next year. We want to see a longer-term deal than that, but that is a negotiation between relevant Government agencies and Post Office Ltd.

It is the case that consumer habits are driving down remuneration, and I do not think it is for us to dictate to our citizens how they should access services. Increasingly—I am sure the hon. Lady and other Members have done this—we access services such as passport or driving licence renewal online. That is much more convenient for many people, and it is driving down remuneration significantly. Only a few years ago, some of those Government services were contributing about £500 million annually to the post office network. That is down to a few tens of millions of pounds now, again because of consumer habits, but we are keen to try to make sure that there are other opportunities for postmasters.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) referred to elderly people and those who are isolated in the community and do not have access to online services. Those are the people who tell me they need their post office. There are many of them. I think the Minister would probably agree that there is a duty on the Government to try to encourage the renewal of those contracts come next March, and to ensure that the people we represent are looked after.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I say that both as a Member of Parliament serving a rural area and as postal affairs Minister. We want to make sure that every citizen of this entire nation is served properly. Post offices do an important job in that. We need to make sure that post offices are there, not just due to Government support, but because people use them. There are some things that we are working hard on to try to make sure that the level of remuneration, which lies at the heart of this debate, is improved.

As the hon. Member for Edinburgh West is aware, Duart Crescent and Blackhall post offices have both unfortunately closed in recent months, due to their respective postmasters choosing to resign; they were not closed by the Post Office. The Post Office is advertising those opportunities to local retailers to try to reinstate services.

Christine Jardine: On the Minister's point about Duart Crescent, yes, the postmaster resigned, but it is proving impossible to get a replacement there and in Blackhall, because the remuneration does not encourage them. Perhaps he will bear in mind another important point: we are all buying things online, and consumers are driving that change, but Royal Mail delivers a lot of them and we often go to the post office to return or collect them.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I will come to those comments shortly. Remuneration has to be part of the solution.

Barnton post office and Davidson's Mains post office are both under a mile away respectively from the previous outlets at Duart Crescent and Blackhall, so there are post office services, and I understand that there are public transport routes to those services, although I have not been myself. The Government understand the disruption that the two recent closures will no doubt have caused. In October, Broomhall Drive post office opened, following a local consultation exercise in line with Post Office's principles of community engagement, after the temporary closure of the St John's Road post office.

Let me turn to future opportunities. Post office banking services are really important—again, they are important to remuneration—and there have been some issues with deposit limits. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury and I have applied a certain amount of pressure to banks and UK Finance to ensure that that situation is resolved, and it has improved to an extent, which is good news. We have also legislated, through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, for access to cash, which is really important. The Financial Conduct Authority is required to ensure that people have access to cash.

Christine Jardine: I thank the Minister for giving way again. Does he agree that, when the contract is up shortly, a longer contract, to ensure stability for post offices with the banks, and the creation of more hubs that involve post offices, will be essential?

Kevin Hollinrake: Absolutely. This is a real opportunity for the network, and not just for a longer-term contract for more stability. It has the banking framework, which forms its relationship with the banks. The banks have made around £2.5 billion of cost savings through the closure of branches. We think that a greater share of those savings should be provided to the post office network to improve remuneration and invest in productivity tools for postmasters, such as cash-counting machines, so that the job of running a post office is more lucrative. We see that as a big opportunity.

In the banking framework, we have been clear with UK Finance and Post Office that they should be ambitious in negotiations and secure extra remuneration for the network. There were some improvements to remuneration in April, but I am aware, as I speak to postmasters all the time, that those improvements have not gone far enough in their view. I work closely with the National Federation of SubPostmasters, and we hear these views all the time, so we are very alive to the difficulties.

The other big opportunity that the hon. Lady implied is in the increasing number of parcels couriered around our country. There has been an exciting development in the parcels market for the Post Office, which has just launched something called Parcels Online. For the first time, Post Office will offer a multi-carrier in-branch proposition: because the exclusive agreement with Royal Mail has ended, a customer can go into a post office and use the services of DPD, Evri and others, which are being sold by postmasters. That is a great opportunity for postmasters and may well lift their revenue. That is the kind of future we see for post offices: providing

access to cash and banking services—and getting paid better and more lucratively to do so—and offering parcel hub opportunities. Those are both really important services.

The hon. Lady mentioned banking hubs. That is a slight bone of contention, in my view. At the moment, they have not really been co-located with post offices, and I would like to explore with UK Finance more opportunities for co-location where space allows. It makes little sense to have two different units on the high street when we could have one really sustainable unit. That is something we are looking at too.

On what the Government can do through direct support, we have provided more than £2.5 billion over the past 10 years and will provide £335 million between 2022 and 2025. We have also provided around £50 million through the annual network subsidy for rural post offices, as well as other measures we provide to the general business community, such as rates support worth £13.6 billion. Another £4.3 billion was announced in the autumn statement.

Matt Rodda: Would the Minister reassure me on the interoperability of post office systems with those belonging to building societies? We have talked about that before, given some of the difficulties with accessing cash in my constituency. Will he also pass on my concerns and those of colleagues to Royal Mail about the lack of cover for postal staff when they are off sick? That appears to be driving some of the problems with delivery.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight those issues. Through the work that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury and I have done with UK Finance, more clarity has been given to postmasters about the limits for certain banks that have particular problems. The feedback I have got from postmasters is that the situation has improved, but I am very happy to hear feedback from Members of the House, including the hon. Gentleman, if that is not the case.

Of course, Royal Mail and the Post Office are two different things. Royal Mail has recently been fined for its underperformance. It has been affected by many different issues, including, of course, industrial action; it has had its share of issues this year. Hopefully it is putting those issues behind it, but we certainly expect to see a much better performance from Royal Mail going forward.

Like all retailers, post offices are facing very significant challenges at the moment. We have been clear about their value, both socially and economically—for our communities and for our economy. We will continue to work with the Post Office to ensure that both the organisation itself and the network are sustainable and fit for the future. We very much appreciate the work that the hon. Member for Edinburgh West does in this area; she quite rightly challenges me all the time on this. We are very much on the same page when it comes to making sure we have a viable network around the country, not least in our rural areas.

Question put and agreed to.

10.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 27 November 2023

[DAME CAROLINE DINENAGE *in the Chair*]

Legislation on Dangerous Dogs

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 18 October 2023, on Pet welfare and abuse, Session 2022-23, HC 1123].

4.30 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) to open the debate, I wish to make a short statement about sub judice resolution. I am sure Members have relevant constituency cases that they might want to raise in the debate. I remind them that under the terms of the House's sub judice resolution, Members should not refer to any cases where there are ongoing legal proceedings; they should also exercise caution if raising matters that are not the subject of active legal proceedings, but where discussion could prejudice ongoing police or other law enforcement investigations.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 624876 and 643611 relating to legislation in respect of dangerous dogs.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline.

Jack was 10. His mum, Emma, described him as "our perfect boy". On 8 November 2021, Jack went to call on a friend. He was attacked and killed by an XL bully. Jack suffered fatal injuries. He was 10 years old, and his life was over—absolutely tragic. Jack's mum, Emma, told me that their lives will never be the same again. The community came together and showed huge support for Emma and her family, but sadly Jack is gone forever. I have had to lead petition debates on many subjects, often in circumstances where a life has been lost, but I do not believe that I have ever had to speak when there has been a loss of life in such horrific circumstances.

We have two petitions before us for debate. The first calls for the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 to be repealed; the second calls for the Act not to include the XL bully. Having heard Emma's story and taken evidence before today, and having seen and heard of many of these attacks, I can understand why the Government have announced a ban, but before I move on to the arguments, I will make it clear that Emma never called for the ban, as she believed that it would never happen. Shockingly, since the announcement of the ban, Emma has received real abuse from people who disagree with it. Doing that to a grieving mother is abhorrent, and I hope that if those responsible are caught, they are dealt with severely. Emma has suffered enough. Her only goal is to ensure that no one else has to go through such an ordeal. My heart goes out to her.

I will turn to the position of the Government and the petitioners. Following a concerning rise in attacks and fatalities caused by XL bully dogs, the Government have added the breed to the list of dogs banned under

the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. To help current owners adapt to the new laws, the changes will come into force in two stages. From 31 December 2023, it will be against the law to sell an XL bully dog, to abandon an XL bully dog or let it stray, to give away an XL bully dog, to breed from an XL bully dog and to have an XL bully in public without a lead and muzzle. From 1 February 2024, it will be a criminal offence to own an XL bully dog in England and Wales unless the dog has a certificate of exemption.

There is help with getting an exemption certificate on the Government website. If people want to keep their dog, it must be microchipped, kept on a lead and muzzled at all times when in public, kept in a secure place so that it cannot escape, and neutered. The owner must be over 16 years old, take out third-party public liability insurance against their dog injuring other people, and be able to show the certificate of exemption when asked by a police officer or council dog warden, either at the time or within five days.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a good point about what the Government have laid out on their website. One of my concerns is about the ban coming in so quickly. Does he believe that the public have enough information, or know where to find the information, to enable conscientious owners who want to look after these dogs and protect them to make an informed decision? Is there enough time to ensure that the information about what is needed from responsible owners gets out?

Nick Fletcher: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point, which I will come to later in my speech.

I have discussed these petitions with many friends and colleagues. Like me, after hearing of such horrific attacks, they found it hard to believe the numbers that support repealing the ban. We have banned other dogs in the past, and these dogs are obviously dangerous, so who would not want to ban them? What is the reason? Let us explore further. During my research, I spoke to many professionals in this field; I attended six evidence sessions, and I attended the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in October.

What has been said by the petitioners? Anita Mehdi, the creator of the main petition, states that she believes that adding another breed to the Dangerous Dogs Act is not the right way forward. She also believes that the media is to blame for fearmongering, and there is no official data on dog breeds and dog attacks. Anita hopes for a platform where accurate data can be recorded. Anita also believes that it is dangerous to class a dog by its type, when it is irresponsible owners that need to be targeted. She believes that the Calgary model is a good example that the Government should take into consideration when looking into responsible ownership. When asked about muzzles, Anita explained that responsible owners will comply and use them, but there will be owners who will not, and they need to be tackled.

Glyn Saville, a petitioner against the XL bully ban, who is here today, says that the number of XL bullies is in excess of 90,000 and that implementing the ban will therefore be very difficult. He also says that these dogs are not bred to be aggressive to humans—although some people may disagree—and that if a ban is brought into effect, families living in social housing will be at

[*Nick Fletcher*]

real risk of losing their pets if they wish to stay there, as landlords can refuse exempted dogs. Another petitioner, who has called for muzzles not to be part of the ban, said that her dog can now not defend itself and that it has being attacked by other dogs, since having to wear a muzzle.

Even the professionals have concerns. The British Veterinary Association stated that banning one breed will not work. The BVA representative compared it to the banning of a single weapon and explained that it may work in the short term but that the ultimate goal is surrounded by so many complex social issues that it would be difficult for it to last in the long term.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Emma, whose son, Jack, was brutally killed by an XL bully dog two years ago, is my constituent. Emma is of the opinion that, whatever happens with regards to a ban on XL bullies—the hon. Member has touched upon the enormous difficulties and complications—it is vital that we place the emphasis on tackling the whole issue of dangerous dogs. A one-off action by the Government is not enough; it can never be enough. We need a thorough, wholesale examination of dog breeding and dog training practices, and we need to look at the specific question of responsible ownership. All of those issues have to be considered so that our society is truly safer.

Nick Fletcher: I will be coming to many of the points that the hon. Member raises. Hopefully, the Minister can shed some light on them, too.

Both the BVA, when I spoke to its representatives at the London Vet Show, and my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) raised the fact that most fatalities have occurred in people's houses, rather than when a dog has been out. Obviously, in the house, dogs are not muzzled or on a short lead. They also asked that the Dangerous Dog Act be reviewed and highlighted that section 3 of the Act gives scope for something to be done about controlling dogs. I often say that it is not always new legislation but enforcement of existing legislation that is needed. That also needs to be looked at.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals explained that it wants the Government to slow down the pace of the ban coming into force, mainly because of its implications and consequences. It also raised the fact that it is becoming incredibly difficult to ensure that everyone who owns an XL bully can do what they need to do before the deadline in order to keep their dog. The RSPCA mentioned that it is seeing abandonment and relinquishment of these types of due to unexpected costs before Christmas. The BVA highlighted that the window for neutering should be extended for another six months for dogs under seven months old, as neutering has an impact on their growth. The RSPCA suggested that there be a campaign on responsible dog ownership but also suggested that stakeholders be brought together to see what dog legislation may look like in the next five years.

In addition to my research, *The Mirror* is supporting the proposed Jack Lis law, which calls for a different approach to dog legislation that will include all dogs and focus on the breeding, training and sale of dogs.

There is much interest in this topic, and rightly so. I do not think that anyone who signed these petitions should be vilified. Many people understand that something needs to be done, but when experts agree that there are problems, the Government should listen. We have to stop these incidents occurring, that is for sure. If we are to ban the XL bully, the timeline for neutering definitely needs to be looked at, and we must really push for responsible ownership.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am genuinely conflicted about this. I was on the EFRA Select Committee when it conducted a previous inquiry into the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, which was rushed through and not fit for purpose. At the same time, my heart goes out to any family who has been affected by an XL bully dog killing someone, particularly a child. When we talk about responsible dog ownership and training courses or anything like that, my concern is that it will be the owners who are already responsible who take them up, and it is very difficult to spot an irresponsible owner until the dog has caused harm. Has the Committee looked at that?

Nick Fletcher: The Petitions Committee has not looked at that, but I believe that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has done. I am coming on to that in the next part of my speech.

DEFRA has had a responsible dog ownership steering group, which published a report and confirmed that the recommendations would be shared later this year. Can the Minister say when they will be shared? The Calgary model was mentioned many times during my research, so we have something that we can copy, and improve if required.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. In the light of the concerning incidents involving dog attacks, particularly those attributed to XL bully breeds, does he agree that the Government should shed light on their plans to implement DNA sampling and to adopt the Calgary model for dog classification in order to ensure accurate identification and classification of such dogs?

Nick Fletcher: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. We should definitely look at the Calgary model. I know that the type and breed of dogs is a contentious area, and some work needs to be done on it, but I genuinely believe that people know what type of dog they have. They know whether they have an XL bully. We need to be really careful not to let classification be used as a way of not muzzling dogs that could cause harm. That is the last thing we want.

We are an animal-loving country, but we must encourage personal responsibility when making the decision to own a pet. We must choose a dog that fits our home, our family and our lifestyle. Dog owners must ensure that they understand the costs involved and that they train their dogs correctly—and themselves, for that matter. Some say that we need to enforce chipping of dogs and have a database that accurately records all pets and any bites that have occurred, no matter how minor. We must also look at breeders to see what can be done; many breeders are good, but not all.

We must never again have to hear of another story like Emma's. In memory of little Jack, we should work collectively to come up with the right answers for the safety of the public and of our pets—and we must do it quickly.

4.44 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Dame Caroline.

This is an extremely emotive issue, and I hope people understand the views of others. What the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) and my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) said about 10-year-old Jack is enough to make anyone despair—it is very, very sad. My constituency has the highest number of individuals who signed the petition—nearly 3,000—and the constituency next to mine, Blyth Valley, has the second highest, so the House can see that views are split.

It is a fact that more people—it seems to be mainly young people—are being injured in such incidents. According to the police figures, there were 11,373 incidents between July 2021 and June 2022, and 13,940 this year. This cannot continue; it is absolutely desperate stuff. Just a few weeks ago, little Kaiden Burn, my constituent, was playing in the street when he was mauled by a dog. It was not muzzled or on a lead; it was running rampant through the street, but the thing is that it had done it before. The police were aware of it, but nothing happened, and that wonderful young lad was mauled while playing in his own street.

As I say, this is a very emotive issue. As a dog lover, I understand that people are concerned about losing a much loved, well behaved pet because a Government regulation considers all dogs with a certain look to be dangerous and bans them. There must be a recognition that each individual dog has its own temperament, personality and character. I agree with a number of the comments made by the hon. Member for Don Valley, the RSPCA and other organisations: banning dogs merely based on what they look like is not the best approach. The latest breed to be treated in this manner, which is of course why we are here today, is the American XL bully. I understand the anxiety of responsible owners of those dogs or dogs that simply look like that breed, but we must recognise that there is a problem with dangerous dogs: they have caused far too many deaths and serious injuries, and the numbers are increasing. Not all owners have had the training or have the knowledge required to own certain types of dogs.

There are many problems, but one of the core ones is the horrendous increase in unscrupulous backyard breeders of dogs of this nature. Some people think they can make a few bob out of selling the dogs, but they do not have a clue what they are doing and it is causing absolute mayhem. Some of the legislation that has been put in place tackles that to a certain degree, but the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is inflexible, crude and fails to address the complex issues that many hon. Members have mentioned. As a consequence, it fails in its stated aim of protecting people from dog attacks, so a fresh approach and more sophisticated legislation on dangerous dogs is needed. We should recognise that this is not just about the XL bully; it is about dangerous dogs.

We talk about the XL bullies, but what is an XL bully? Basically, it is a crossbreed. We cannot just say, “Well that dog looks like an XL bully,” and make some measurement so it qualifies to be euthanised. That is not the right approach—it really is not. A lot of these XL bullies are absolutely wonderful dogs. I bet most people in here have a pet of their own, and they would not want somebody coming knocking on their door

saying that their dog looked like it was of a certain breed, “So unfortunately, my friend, if you don’t have the papers required under the amendments to the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, we will have to take it away and put it down.” That really is not the right approach, understanding the families who suffered so greatly because of dangerous dogs.

The information sent out says that if the dog meets certain characteristics, it might be considered as an XL bully—what does that mean? It is not about whether someone has an XL bully, but if their dog’s breed might be an XL bully. The hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan) made a really fair point: there needs to be a bit of definition. I understand that if we check the DNA of any particular dog, it will go back to a million years ago and have different characteristics of different breeds. If we look at a dalmation, we know it is a dalmation because it has black spots and a white coat. However, things are not the same for XL bullies.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes such a powerful point. I have been struck by how constructive the correspondence from both sides has been on this issue, given how emotive it is. As a mum, I find it devastating to think about children being mauled. But a constituent wrote to me and said:

“Although I do not own an XL Bully, family members and close friends own Staffordshire terriers, Labrador crosses, and other bully crosses, which have been proved by DNA not to be XL Bully’s, although, under the current guidelines, would incorrectly see them be classified as XL Bully’s.”

The issue is sending shivers up the spines of many pet owners, and it is incumbent on us to think it through very carefully.

Ian Lavery: The hon. Lady makes a positive and accurate point. My family dog—it is not mine, but my son’s—Olive, is a beautiful young puppy, but I am pleased that she has shorter legs. If she had had longer legs, I’m telling you that somebody would be saying that she was a dangerous dog. But she is one of the most wonderful animals ever. The hon. Lady makes a valid point.

Staffies—Staffordshire bull terriers—are fantastic animals. Anybody with any expertise in the dog world knows about Staffordshire bull terriers. There will be the odd bad one in any breed, by the way: there can be bad labradors and bad retrievers. But what is being said is that we need to look at dangerous dogs, not just XL bullies. I am wondering: who is going to police this? Who is going to be knocking on the doors with a tape measure? As has been mentioned, a lot of families are concerned that their dogs might be classified because they look like something. They might lose a loving pet—it is not right.

I urge the Minister to think about two main points. We have to ensure that people follow Government legislation and what has been put out there. It is essential that they do that. The Government have to pause and review this entire legislation and come forward with amendments to the Dangerous Dogs Act, not just focus solely on one potential breed that might be considered to look like something that it might not be. It is absolutely crazy. At the same time, please do not think that I do not want any legislation. I want to ensure that not a single person is mauled again by any dogs, anywhere in this country. I would support whatever we can do to do that properly—properly, man.

[*Ian Lavery*]

Another real point is the fear of dumping before the 31 December deadline. A huge issue is that people will dump these dogs, whether that is because they cannot afford it or they do not understand the legislation. We then have the issue that, if the dogs are put into an animal rescue centre after the 31 December, they cannot be removed—so the rescue centres could be inundated with dogs.

There is also a massive issue with the veterinary surgeons. If I was a vet, I would not be putting a healthy dog down. I would not. It is important that we put dangerous dogs to sleep, but I would not be putting healthy dogs down because the Government said so—I think that is really important.

Wayne David: My hon. Friend has made a number of very good points indeed. Does he share my concern about the Government's introduction of a ban on XL bullies? Many of the illegal breeders are quite unscrupulous individuals, as he has mentioned; if action is not taken against them, they will simply move on and create another kind of dog. As he says, the XL bully is not a distinct breed but an amalgamation of other breeds. The same thing might happen with another kind of dog if action is not taken against those illegal breeders.

Ian Lavery: Absolutely, that is so true. One of my final points is about unscrupulous owners and breeders. As I mentioned before, the breeders are crossbreeding these dogs with different types and what for? A lot of these owners love the fact that they can walk around with the XL bully and say, "Look at me—I'm big and I'm tough. I've got this dog, and I'll set it on you." But the vast majority of owners are responsible and they love their dogs. That is the huge issue in this debate today.

My final point is basically focused at the Minister. The letter from 31 October mentions that if an owner wants to put their dog down, the Government will give them £200 to do so. What about the people who are struggling, who have a dog, and who are looking after the dog very well? They might not be able to afford the insurance or the licence—the £92. What about the Government considering some sort of financial support to regulate and regularise good, honest owners and good, honest breeders?

4.58 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. As the Secretary of State who introduced this legislation—in fact, it was my last act in Government—I thought it appropriate to contribute to today's debate.

The debate surrounding the ban on XL bully dogs under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is itself a complex issue that evokes strong emotions. I understand that very much, and the approach taken was carefully considered. I was also aware before your earlier ruling, Dame Caroline, that there are potential legal challenges against the Government, so I need to be measured and not reveal all the information that we considered during this time.

I have had three rescue dogs, and my mother and sister have another rescue dog at the moment. There is no doubt that an adorable pet brings a lot to people's lives and hearts. I am also very conscious of the challenges

faced by those people who have suffered from dog attacks, whether it be against their children, themselves, or indeed their own pets. They obviously can be very distressed by that.

In reality, there was no knee-jerk reaction; there were simply too many attacks happening, and the proportion of attacks by XL bully-type dogs was considerably higher than others. Yes, I am sure we have all read about how other dogs—whether a collie, Jack Russell or potentially a rottweiler—have also been involved in many attacks. The issue is about the proportion and seriousness of the attacks, and indeed about how they can be stopped—that is pretty difficult. It is about the fatalities as well.

The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) talked about how we define a breed, and some of the point is that this breed is not defined. I pay tribute to the chief veterinary officer and the many officials who have been involved extensively in this sensitive matter, working with animal welfare experts and experts from the police and, indeed, local councils, who will have to undertake a lot of this work. I want to assure the House that a lot of care has been taken over this approach, and that is also why a lot of this will be through guidance and there will be individual decisions.

I come back to the fact that, of course, many of these dogs are pets. They are not necessarily status symbols, but we know that they have been used for that. We see a lot of that in how the ears of these dogs have been cropped to give them a more aggressive feel and appearance, despite the fact that that is already illegal under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. It is not illegal to import the dogs, but we are talking about an extensive element where that is the case. Since the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, there have been some amendments along the way, partly driven through case law. That was back in '97, and there were further regulations in 2015, but there was a specific reason for that. I suggest that the extent of the attacks is the reason why the XL bully is the first breed to have been added to section 1 since 1991.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): My right hon. Friend is an esteemed legislator of great repute. Does she agree therefore that in this Parliament we cannot legislate with imprecision? That is exactly what the statutory instrument does. It talks about "characteristics", which it says may or may not be necessary for the definition. Surely we need to make the law clear beyond peradventure so that the people of this country know which side of the law they are on.

Dr Coffey: I would say to my hon. Friend that the guidance is as clear as it can be. It gives a number of physical characteristics, and I am sure the Minister will say more about that and the process being gone through. I suppose that in introducing the legislation, I very much wanted to put across that the issue is not being considered lightly and that a lot of care and attention has been given to the detail.

I must admit that I have had several death threats about this legislation and I am conscious that it is driving those strong emotions. What I will say is that the Government took an approach that would allow time for people to rehome an XL bully-type dog if they felt they could not keep it. Also, the situation is very different from what has happened recently, when people have had a pit bull or similar: owners can still apply to

get a certificate and join the index of exempt dogs. The default here is that every person who registers their XL bully-type dog will get a certificate automatically and will automatically join the index. That is a significant difference, even though I am conscious it will cost some money to do that.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to the former Secretary of State, and the point she is making should be considered. From 31 December, breeding, selling, advertising, gifting and abandoning XL bully dogs will be illegal, but there is also the issue of rehoming. A Sky report over the weekend said that 246 of these dogs are waiting to be rehomed. I had a constituent stop me on the high street who wanted to rehome one of these dogs but was struggling to get the information on how to go about doing that. I am slightly concerned because rehoming is one way of saving these dogs by ensuring they get support from a responsible owner who will take on a licence. Could a carve-out for rehoming be considered, so that it is pushed back to 1 February in line with the rest of the exemptions coming in?

Dr Coffey: I am not in Government anymore, so that is a question for the Minister. I think that was done to bring to an end the opportunity for the transfer of dogs. It is admittedly on a rapid timescale, but we must remember the reason why we are taking this approach at all: to try to stop attacks. People read about attacks every week, and they are happening around the country. Somebody may absolutely want to help a dog by rehoming it, but they need a certain amount of training to look after such a strong animal.

If we think about an adult XL bully dog, we are talking about something that weighs about 70 kg. These are big dogs. They really have a lot of strength and, frankly, the only way to unlock their jaws once they latch on to somebody is basically to choke them. Do not kick them in the head or anything like that—that will only make them grab on even tighter. That is what we are dealing with. Sadly, some of these dogs do get out of control and it is their characteristics that lead them to have that physical strength. Also, we must not get away from the fact that they were originally parts of various bits of pit bulls, mastiffs and similar.

It is, of course, understandable why people who have their XL bully dog next to their children every night, with the dog probably licking the children to death—if that makes sense—think it will protect them. But there is the risk and the results of that risk are happening too often.

I am not planning to linger in this debate; I will just say briefly why I think this an effective piece of legislation. I am very conscious of the reviews that have happened and how different Select Committees have called for more extensive action. I am also very aware that the Dogs Trust, the RSPCA and similar charities do not think the legislation effective. However, the reality is that the number of attacks by pit bulls basically went away when this legislation was put into place. The muzzling and the different licence approach are things that we need to happen as quickly as possible for the existing XL bully dogs in this country.

As for alternatives, there has been a lot of talk about licensing. Well, licensing to own a dog was scrapped a long time ago. I do not think that councils would

welcome having to take on the whole licensing of dogs right across the country. Of course there has to be enforcement on breeding and disreputable practices. In section 3 of the 1991 Act, there is a wider approach for all dogs; any dog can be dangerous. So far, however, five specific dogs have been singled out, because of their characteristics.

I am very conscious that the job of politicians is to make law. I appreciate that one of my hon. Friends does not think this law is necessarily the right way. But this is what we do—one day something can be legal and the next day it can be illegal. We do these things because we believe they are the right thing to do.

It is of course open to Members to pray against this statutory instrument, but I really hope that does not happen because it is important that people get certainty and can take positive action. As I say, anybody who has an XL bully dog right now will be granted the certificate to join the index of exempt dogs. In effect, that will be automatic, as long as the conditions are complied with and they can say so on that register.

I am conscious that many people want to speak today. In conclusion, people must have time to rehome and everybody who loves their XL bully should be able to keep it. I commend the legislation, which is still passing through the House.

5.7 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Ind): It is always an honour to serve under your chairpersonship, Dame Caroline.

It is a privilege to speak in this debate on e-petitions 624876 and 643611 relating to legislation in respect of dangerous dogs, and so admirably led by the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher). I congratulate the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on her appointment as Chair of the Petitions Committee.

Currently, four breeds are banned under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991: the pit bull terrier; the Japanese tosa; the dogo argentino; and the fila brasileiro. However, following the rise in the number of attacks and fatalities, the Government have added the XL bully to the list of banned breeds. From 31 December, strict conditions will need to be complied with and from 1 February 2024 it will be a criminal offence to own an XL bully in England or Wales without a certificate of exemption.

Dogs suspected of being of a prohibited type are assessed against a standard that describes what a particular type of dog should look like. However, the number of characteristics is not a guide and neither is the way in which the assessment should be conducted, which results in many legal breeds and crossbreeds fitting the standard, regardless of the dog's behaviour.

I am shocked and saddened by the appalling reports of attacks and deaths that have dominated the news recently. Obviously, I share the public's concerns and agree that current legislation has not prevented these serious dog attacks. Urgent action is clearly needed, but breed-specific legislation is not the answer. The Dangerous Dogs Act has failed to protect the public since it was introduced, and dog bite incidents have risen since then.

Animal welfare, and particularly dog welfare, is an issue close to my heart. During the past five years, I have worked closely with Vanessa Waddon of Hope Rescue in Llanharan, which is a dog rescue centre that often takes in dogs that have been seized from illegal breeders.

[Christina Rees]

Since the ban was announced on 15 September, it has been inundated with calls and messages from worried owners asking for advice, and especially from those who are not sure whether their dogs meet the standard because it is so wide.

Hope Rescue is receiving up to five calls a day from owners in all areas of the UK asking it to take in their XL bully. It is concerned that, as the date approaches, there is a risk that some dogs will simply be abandoned. The rescue holds several stray dog contracts, so there is a chance that those dogs will enter it as strays. Capacity is already under huge pressure due to the current animal welfare crisis, which has resulted from the increased number of dogs purchased during the pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis. In fact, the centre is over capacity and is having to pay for overflow kennelling to ensure that it can meet its stray dog commitments to local authorities. The likely abandonments will put additional pressure on a system that is already broken due to a lack of kennel capacity.

Hope Rescue has already seen an increase in the number of large bull breeds coming through the stray dog system—again due to the breadth of the standard. The predicted increase in the number of dogs coming through the system is likely to impact the centre's ability to help other dogs urgently in need, especially through its work supporting local authorities with dogs seized from illegal and low-welfare breeders. That could lead to dogs being left to suffer longer in poor conditions, as there is nowhere for them to go. The centre is proud of the much-needed support it provides to licensing teams in Wales, and it is heartbreaking that it may not be able to help in the future.

Hope Rescue is also hugely concerned about the XL bullies currently in its care that it does not yet own. They have been seized from illegal breeders but have not been signed over through the section 20 court process. These are young, rehomeable dogs, and the centre has worked hard with them to prepare them for their new homes. It is worried that the court process will not be completed in time to rehome them before the ban comes in and that it will have no choice but to euthanise them. Hope Rescue is also worried about any XL bully types that come into its care as the 31 December deadline gets nearer. As a responsible rescue, it takes Hope Rescue time to properly assess a dog for rehoming, but after that date it will not be able to rehome them.

The wellbeing of staff is a huge and legitimate concern. These passionate and caring individuals have chosen a career in animal welfare because they want to make a positive difference to the lives of rescued dogs. Things are already tough for the staff due to the animal welfare crisis and the number of dogs coming into their care. Being forced to euthanise healthy, rehomeable dogs, which may never have put a paw wrong, will be devastating for them.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Ind): I have listened intently to the debate because, like many Members, I feel conflicted about it. My interest was piqued last summer when three women who were walking their dogs in a park in Newton-le-Willows in my constituency were attacked by an XL bully. Their dogs were badly injured, and they were injured and have been traumatised too.

It is important to make the point that many who are in favour of the Government's proposals are also dog lovers, and they and their animals deserve our consideration and protection as well.

Christina Rees: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I really respect his view, which he put in a measured way.

On behalf of Hope Rescue, I urge the UK Government to consider letting rescue centres rehome XL bully types that, through no fault of their own, find themselves in a rescue centre.

Wayne David: The hon. Member and I visited the Hope Rescue centre in Llanharan a few months ago, where we saw and heard many moving things. I was particularly moved by the number of deformed dogs that the centre had taken from illegal dog breeders, many of which would otherwise have had to be put down. That brought home to me how illegal breeding is such a menace and really needs to be clamped down on. Does the hon. Member agree?

Christina Rees: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Not many people know this, but we were in school together many years ago at Cynffig Comprehensive School, so I always listen to his views, and I do agree with him on this.

On behalf of Hope Rescue, I urge the UK Government to consider letting rescue centres rehome XL bully types—that, through no fault of their own, find themselves in a rescue centre—subject to the exemption process and being assessed for suitable rehoming.

A friend of mine, Professor John Cooper KC, will be taking the legal challenge to the Government if the ban is not halted. Between 2016 and 2017, John and I served on the Bach commission, which was chaired by Lord Willy Bach and which provided detailed proposals on establishing the right to access justice as a fundamental and enforceable public entitlement. John has always been a staunch advocate of animal welfare both in and out of court, as well as being relentless in his representation of people who find themselves in the most vulnerable of situations. His work with dogs includes advising on the reform of the Dangerous Dogs Act—particularly the flawed breed-specific legislation regime—and advising on and drafting proposals for a more effective sentencing regime for pet theft. A former columnist for *Dogs Today*, John has a rescue lurcher called Lawrence.

Professor Cooper KC has stated:

“This is knee jerk legislation, which has neither maturely reflected on the wealth of evidence which is available or taken the time to reasonably consider the best ways to protect the public and act rationally in relation to the dog. It simply will not work.

Any proposed ban is no more than putting a sticking plaster over the issue as unscrupulous breeders simply move on to the next dog.

The answer according to the government's own previous reports is an effective licensing regime, responsible ownership and stricter penalties and sentencing powers in the courts.

The law, maturely and carefully considered, can protect the public. This, tragically, goes nowhere near that.”

I cannot agree more with Professor Cooper's words. Nor can I disagree with the heartfelt plea of Vanessa Waddon and her wonderful staff at Hope Rescue. For those reasons I call on the Government to halt the ban's

implementation, support responsible rescue centres, review the effectiveness of breed-specific legislation and carefully consider how to properly protect the public from serious and fatal dog attacks.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (in the Chair): I call the Chairman of the EFRA Committee, Sir Robert Goodwill.

5.19 pm

Sir Robert Goodwill: Thank you, Dame Caroline. First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for presenting this debate in a very balanced way. As Chair of the EFRA Committee, I can say that this issue has been on our radar for some time—indeed, we had an evidence session on it. We were particularly indebted to my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), who is a qualified veterinary surgeon and a member of the Committee, for the expertise he brought to bear. It was the Committee’s unanimous view that the ban is needed.

Why have the Government taken action? We have heard of appalling attacks. Fatal attacks are only the tip of the iceberg, and there have been many other reports in the media of people being attacked by dogs and of the police or members of the public having to intervene. And, of course, there are no statistics at all for dog-on-dog attacks, as we have heard.

The statistics do not make comfortable reading. Until the last three years, there were roughly three fatal attacks a year, but that number has now gone up to 10 or 11. More than half of those attacks are down to XL bullies; of the remainder, many are down to similar breeds.

I was lobbied to suggest, “Saying these dogs are dangerous is like saying red cars are dangerous, because there are a lot of red cars about,” but that does not stack up at all. The best estimate we got from one of the big veterinary groups is that there are around 50,000 of these dogs in the country. Using a simple, back-of-a-cigarette-packet calculation would indicate that, given the number of fatalities that are down to these dogs, they may be 200 or 300 times more dangerous than other dogs. Adding these dogs, as well as pit bulls and three other breeds, to section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 is a sensible way forward. As we heard from the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), that was an effective piece of legislation.

We are also told by a number of people that these dogs are hard to define—it is down to a characteristic, rather than a particular breed. However, interestingly, when the Committee went to Battersea Dogs & Cats Home and saw a litter of puppies, staff told us, “These are American XL bully puppies”—there was no doubt in their mind what this breed was. Indeed, when I looked this afternoon at a website where dogs are advertised, there were 458 dogs described as American XLs. In many cases, the parents and grandparents of these dogs were shown in photographs, and they were also described as XL bullies. I can understand why people may try to argue that their dogs are not of this breed, but the veterinary profession and people training these dogs actually understand fairly well what they are.

When I looked at this issue at the time of our inquiry, it was interesting that these dogs were trading at anywhere between £800 and £1,500. Now they can be picked up

for £200 or are, indeed, “Free to a good home.” The concern about them being dumped on the roadside really has some bearing. There were also some interesting descriptions in some of the advertisements. One described the dog, saying:

“Fine with kids but does get excited quickly.”

It chilled my heart to think what might happen. Another said:

“Not fond of other dogs”—

and that was a person trying to describe the dog in a positive way in an effort to find a market.

It is right that we recognise the concerns of owners of other breeds, which may get lumped into the same category as these dogs. I spoke today with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who has a constituent with an Old Tyme bulldog, and there is a concern that it could fall into this category. It is important that we make sure not only that these dogs are registered but that people with other breeds have some reassurance that their breeds will not fall into this category. I hope the Minister will give us some reassurance.

Why do people have these dogs? We are told they can be good family pets but, as the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) said, if somebody wants to be big and tough, they have one of these dogs. I have heard it said that someone who carries a knife on the street will be arrested and searched by the police, but they can walk around with one of these dogs with impunity, and it can be used to intimidate other people. I saw a report in the paper—I will not refer to the specific case—where a dog was used in an attack, and the police have laid a murder charge. On the “Jeremy Vine” show, a breeder of these dogs specifically said he bred them to sell to drug dealers. That might have been a bit of bravado but, even so, it does indicate the sort of people—in some cases—who buy these dogs.

My view is quite clear: these dogs are not a suitable family pet. They are a ticking time bomb. If my grandchildren—I have got to that age now—were going to play at a friend’s house where they had one of these dogs, I would forbid it. I also feel concerned about the safety of people in the home: we can muzzle these dogs and have them under control outside, but I am concerned that, in the family home, where some of these attacks have happened, children and other people may be at risk.

We have had reference to rehoming. My understanding is that most of the dog charities are not rehoming these dogs any more, because of the reputational risk—there was a case where a dog that had been rehomed was involved in an incident.

It is important that people who have these dogs and who comply with the law also take sensible precautions. If I was walking a dog and saw one of these dogs coming the other way, I would want to cross the road. Many of these attacks start off as an attack on a dog, but when a person tries to save their dog, it turns into an attack on the individual. I am particularly concerned about visitors to homes and communication workers, such as postmen, who are subject to dog attacks. Dog owners do not seem to take simple precautions, such as putting a cage on the back of the door, so that when people insert their fingers to deliver leaflets—as we often do as politicians—that is not a risk, or putting a postbox on the wall outside a property if there is one of these dogs there.

[*Sir Robert Goodwill*]

Many people are getting third-party insurance—if they join the Dogs Trust, they get automatic third-party insurance. One problem I hope the Minister will look at is whether it will remain possible to get third-party insurance for these dogs if we have further attacks and big claims on insurance policies because a person is severely injured or worse.

Ultimately, this debate is about the value of human life versus the value of canine life, and I think the Government have got the balance right: we must protect human life. If people feel that they cannot keep these dogs and that the restrictions are too onerous, there are lots of dogs in places such as Battersea and the Dogs Trust that do need rehoming, because the boom in dog ownership that we had during the pandemic is turning into a boom in rehoming.

5.26 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I came to the debate to find out more about the issue and to give voice to my constituent Helen. She is caught by what my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) described as the imprecision of the rules on what actually constitutes a dog of this dangerous categorisation. The Minister is as kindly, compassionate and open to reason as any former Chief Government Whip could be, so I presume on the time of the Chamber only to quote a few extracts from a quite convincing letter from my constituent.

Of course, dangerous dogs legislation has a bit of a history. I was not yet a Member of Parliament when the original legislation was passed. However, I think I am correct that it became a bit of a byword for legislation introduced in a hurry on an issue that turned out to be rather more complex than initially seemed to be the case, and I fear that the same may be true of the present update to the Act. It is therefore with reluctance that I say that we of course all agree that the safety of human beings must come first, but if we propose to inflict severe restrictions on pet owners, we must at least be unambiguous in what we do.

Let me turn to what Helen wrote to me:

“I do not have an ‘XL bully’. My dog is, by DNA testing, an American Bulldog X Neapolitan Mastiff mix, with multiple breeds mixed on the mastiff side. In other words, I have your basic mutt, or ‘Heinz 57’ dog. He will be 11 in April and I have had him since he was 9 weeks old. He has never shown an ounce of aggression towards any humans, including at the vets during some incredibly negative procedures, none of which the vets have ever felt he needed to be muzzled for, including when he had to have a stent placed into his ear when he damaged a blood vessel”—a procedure she says he had done, “without pain relief!” She continues:

“So you can imagine my shock, my horror, at learning that the ridiculously vague ‘breed definition’ of the XL bully, very hastily and incredibly poorly formed by the Government ‘experts’, somehow seems to have incorporated every and any large muscular looking dog in the UK, potentially including my beloved boy.”

She says that according to the EFRA Committee discussion, the XL bully came to the UK in 2014, but her dog was born the year before, so she finds it hard to believe that he could so be categorised. She says:

“With such vague descriptors as ‘gives the impression of great power for size’, ‘blocky head’ and ‘neck is medium in length’, and the equally vague descriptor that the dog must meet ‘a substantial

number of the characteristics’, I have no idea if he would fit ‘type’, and seemingly all that matters is what everybody else thinks!”

She then goes on to say, “Of course, you could recommend my taking a ‘precautionary approach’” and register him anyway, because it would just mean that he would have to be on a lead and muzzled in order to comply. However, apart from this costing her dog its freedom, which she feels is wholly undeserved, she says there is much more in the way of consequences than might be expected.

For example, she says that the health insurance, which she has had for the dog ever since she brought him home, would be lost to her. Without health insurance, it would have cost her more than £3,500 for a procedure that her dog had to undergo, but it actually cost her £800 with the insurance. She says that in the midst of a cost of living crisis, she now has to decide whether to register her dog as an XL bully when she does not believe that he is one at all,

“completely and pointlessly removing his freedom and drastically restricting his life, plus lose the financial backing that I have had his entire life just at the time when he will need it most...or I don’t register him as I don’t believe he is one and wait to see if someone else disagrees, reports me, and I wind up having him forcibly seized, taken away (at a point when I don’t know how much longer he has left with me) and, to top it off, become a criminal, when, as a middle-class, middle manager who has never been out of work I’ve had nothing more than a speeding ticket in my whole life.”

In this individual case, Helen is saying—very much in concert with many of the contributions we have heard so far—that this is a blanket approach insufficiently focused on the actual circumstances under which people should be deprived of their dogs. I agree that we need legislation, and that human life must come first, but I do not agree that the statutory instrument, as it stands, cannot be improved. I am therefore, not for the first time, throwing myself on the mercy of this particular Minister; I look to him to give us, when he comes to wind up, an undertaking that the Government, rather than rushing ahead in a blinkered way, will have another look at the formulation that they have come up with to see whether people like Helen, who by no stretch of the imagination pose a danger to the public with their beloved pets, cannot be excluded from a blunderbuss approach, when a rapier is the weapon we ought to employ in dealing with a very real problem.

5.34 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Dame Caroline. I declare my professional and personal interest in this matter: I am a veterinary surgeon and a fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

I fully understand the passion and emotion on both sides of this very important debate, but I have sadly come to the conclusion that the Government are doing the right thing in banning the American XL bully dog. We have heard accounts of recent attacks, and some of us have seen videos; we need to act swiftly. This has been a difficult decision, but the Prime Minister has called for a ban and the Leader of the Opposition has supported him, so the ban is coming and as legislators we need to ensure we get it right. As a veterinary surgeon and MP, I believe we can get it right, but we need to work with all stakeholders.

This is not a party political issue. How we think about human and animal welfare unites us in humanity across the House. We need to protect people and other animals. The ban is coming, and we need to make it work practically, sensitively and compassionately. As we have heard, we also need a longer-term piece of work in parallel to reform the legislation and look closely at responsible dog ownership.

The 1991 Act covers four types of dogs—the pit bull terrier, the Japanese tosa, the dogo argentino and the fila brasileiro—and the American XL bully will be an important addition to that list. I am aware that many XL bullies are friendly pets in the right homes and with the right ownership, but sadly, because of their sheer size and weight, they can become uniquely dangerous. They are hugely powerful dogs, with a hugely powerful, muscular jaw structure, and they can weigh more than 50 kg or 60 kg.

We have heard public statements from consultant human surgeons about the severity of the wounds that these dogs can cause. The bites cause crushing or tearing injuries that are worse than the wounds from other types of dog bites; the statements back that up. The implications of being bitten or attacked by that type of dog, compared with a dog such as a French bulldog or a Jack Russell, are orders of magnitude worse.

Some of these dogs are bred for exaggerated conformation and extreme conformational features, and some have had their ears horrifically cropped. The breeding of these animals has been fuelled by the uptick in unregulated canine fertility clinics, which are not supervised by veterinary surgeons although acts of veterinary surgery, such as blood sampling and artificial insemination, take place in them. The EFRA Committee has looked at that issue closely in our “Pet welfare and abuse” inquiry, and we will be making recommendations about that. Unscrupulous breeders are fuelling the trade in these dogs, some of which are used as status symbols—I emphasise again that it is not all XL bullies, but it is a significant number.

Ear cropping is not clinically indicated in the dog; it is a cosmetic procedure that is illegal in this country, although there are loopholes that mean that the dogs can be imported. I am pleased that in this parliamentary Session the Government will introduce legislation to ban the importation of ear-cropped dogs, because that loophole means that some dogs are being illegally cropped horrifically—potentially in people’s back gardens because kits can be bought online. The procedure does not benefit the animal but it makes it look more intimidating.

Popular culture also has a role to play. Look at some of the really popular animated films: some of the dogs in “Up”, one of my favourite films that I have watched with my kids, were cropped; and one of the lead characters in the film “DC League of Super-Pets” from a couple of years ago had his ears cropped. People going to the cinema and seeing dogs with their ears cropped normalises the practice in society. People think, “Well, that’s normal” and “That’s what dogs should look like,” when actually the procedure is horrific and should be outlawed completely.

As we have heard, there is complexity in typing and defining. The Government have engaged closely with police, veterinary and animal welfare experts, and local authorities to produce guidance and advice, but I stress that this is an evolving, iterative process, and I urge the

Government and stakeholders to continue to work together to stay around the table so that other types of dog are not inadvertently caught up in this ban.

I firmly believe that we need to be very careful about some of the language we use in this debate. We should not be talking about mass culls or killing of animals. Very early on, when this debate came to a head in September, the chief veterinary officer, Christine Middlemiss, spoke of this ban dovetailing with the humane and sensitive managing of the existing population of XL bully dogs. I stress that if these dogs are safe and responsibly owned, people can keep them. They can register them as long as they are neutered, insured, and kept on a lead and muzzled in public.

I urge the Government and local authorities to work with and support all the animal welfare charities. We have heard about the stresses and strains on the animal welfare sector. It was already under significant pressure, and the pandemic put it under much more. I also urge the Government to continue to work closely with the veterinary sector and look at expert opinion, such as that articulated by the British Veterinary Association last week in its letter to the chief vet, which talked about elements like neutering. I think the Government will get the veterinary profession to come along with them by having some flexibility and potentially extending the neutering deadlines, under which many of the dogs will be neutered when they are under 18 months—the age recommended for heavy types of dog. Extending the deadline until the end of June 2025 for dogs of this type that are under seven months at the end of January 2024 could help. It could benefit health and welfare, as there have been studies suggesting that neutering some of these heavy-type dogs too early can lead to an increased risk of developmental orthopaedic disease and some other medical conditions. It is important to try to work closely with the veterinary profession; working collectively will help.

That brings me on to some of the mental health implications of what we are talking about today: for the owners of these animals, the general public at large, the veterinary profession, and the animal welfare sector, which are taking some of the hit on this. We looked very closely at some of these issues in our EFRA Committee inquiry on pet welfare and abuse and in our rural mental health report, which we published this year. Many charities and veterinary professionals will become involved in euthanasia in cases where the dogs cannot be kept. We need to be cognisant of what that means for the veterinary profession, for the paraprofessionals and professionals working in it, and for the animal welfare sector, which works with them.

I have spoken with many in the sector. As has been mentioned, a couple of weeks ago I spoke at the London Vet Show, where I heard significant disquiet and distress among some vets and practices. I firmly believe that if we take that on board, work collectively and responsibly with the sector to see whether we can evolve some points such as the neutering guidelines, and think about the capacity issues with regard to euthanasia, that will help us to get a more practical and sensible ban moving forward. Responding to some of those concerns will get more vets on board. Vets do not like doing things to animals if they do not think there is a clinical benefit for those animals, so some movement would help—the neutering extension would be only six months.

[Dr Neil Hudson]

From December, it will be illegal to breed from these animals. We want to get the existing dogs neutered so that no more of these dogs come into being, but having a little bit of flexibility in working with vets may help.

Equally, I have spoken to some vets who agree that we need to go ahead with this. There are views very much on both sides of the debate. We need to work together to get through this—it is not an easy thing to do. I do not believe that it is a politically expedient issue: the Government and, now, the Leader of the Opposition have backed it. It is a tough thing to do, but it is the right thing to do.

Some vets and charities will disagree with my view. People talk about judging the animal by the deed and not the breed. As far as I am concerned, once that deed is committed, it is too late: that child or adult is maimed, or worse. We therefore need to look at this in the round and think about the deed and/or the breed. In the short term, however, adding this type of dog to the list is the right thing to do.

Dr Luke Evans: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech, and I will be grateful for his expertise on this question. Currently, there are no legal ramifications for a dog that attacks another dog. Are there any precedents for introducing such legislation or for starting to collect data on whether that is predictable; and, in his professional opinion, is a dog that attacks another dog predisposed to attack further dogs or even humans?

Dr Hudson: My fellow clinical colleague—in a different profession—makes a strong point. During the Select Committee inquiry, we found that there is a paucity of data on this. We have certainly seen an uptick in attacks on people, but there is a lack of data on dog-on-dog attacks. Part of this legislation is very much about keeping people safe, but part of it is about keeping other animals safe. The more data we can get in order to make evidence-based decisions, the more it will help.

As other Members have mentioned, a longer piece of work needs to be done in parallel with this short-term legislation. We need to look at responsible breeding, responsible dog ownership, responsible training and responsible socialising of those animals, and we need to tackle some of the issues that have been raised, such as the iniquitous existence of puppy farms and unscrupulous breeders.

We also need to tackle puppy smuggling, and again I am grateful to the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who has been supporting—as the Minister will be doing—private Members' Bills to take elements of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill through the House in order to tackle some of the issues and ultimately to help us to improve animal welfare.

The longer-term changes to address the people who are working with these dogs will not happen overnight. That is why the Government are right to carry on with the short-term ban while the longer piece of work is done. We need to make people better at looking after their dogs, but, in the meantime, we need to keep people safe from this particular type of dog.

Wayne David: The hon. Member is making a very good case, but does he recognise the danger that, by putting the focus on this one piece of legislation and by talking generally of other issues in the future, the impression will be given that one statutory instrument will be sufficient to tackle the problem? Is there not a danger that people will come to believe that, even though we know it not to be the case?

Dr Hudson: The hon. Member makes an interesting point. He also made the point earlier that once we ban this type of dog, people will look to find another type of dog. I acknowledge that some unscrupulous breeders will try to develop the next status-symbol type of dog, but that should not stop us from trying to stop such attacks on people and animals. This legislation is not perfect, but what we have seen in recent times means that something needs to be done now—in addition to a holistic piece of work to address some of the issues that he has rightly raised.

I fully recognise that this is very difficult for many owners. It is very difficult for the animal welfare charities and the veterinary sector as well.

Ian Lavery: As a vet, is the hon. Member not bound by some sort of oath? Vets should not be putting down any animals that are fit and healthy, when there is no reason whatsoever to put them down. He has said he feels that it is necessary. What is his personal view?

Dr Hudson: I have raised many points about vets being uncomfortable with doing some of this. A lot of veterinary practices and companies have surveyed their staff and will not force vets to do things they do not want to do. That said, I come back to the point that if some of these dogs are safe, they can be kept. As we heard from the Chair of the Select Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), it is not feasible for rehoming centres to rehome dogs that are not eligible and put them into an environment where they could hurt someone. Sometimes we need to make professional and clinical judgments.

Sadly, some of these dogs will have to be put down, but I come back to the language that we need to be using. This is not some form of mass cull; actually, we are keeping dogs safe. If dogs are not deemed to be safe and cannot be registered, we must try to keep people and other animals safe. I recognise the difficulties on both sides, but I believe that the spate of attacks we have seen in recent months means that the Government and Parliament are right to act, but we have to get it right. We have to do it practically, sensitively and compassionately to protect people and other animals.

5.51 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline, and to speak in this emotive and hotly contested debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on his opening speech and on introducing the debate. I was appalled to hear that Emma—the courageous mother of 10-year-old Jack, who was sadly killed—has been issued with death threats. That is completely appalling. I was very saddened to hear that,

and I pay tribute to her for her courage and for making a contribution to the debate after suffering such a horrendous loss.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), I feel that it is my duty to speak on behalf of a number of law-abiding constituents who have emailed about this issue—people who would never dream that they could become criminals or be on the other side of the law. It is important that their voices are heard, so I will talk about some of the emails I have received from such individuals.

Marie Angell emailed me to say that she has owned two American bulldogs—a father and a son—since birth. One is seven and the other is three, and they are not just pets; they are members of the family, and she truly loves them both. They have been good animals, and her little boy has grown up with them. They both provide emotional support to the family. She and her parents have suffered from mental health issues in the past and have at times been homeless. Over the years, their dogs have been the only things that got them through hard times. Having finally secured permanent accommodation and settled down, news of the potential ban has had a devastating impact on the mental health of Marie and her family. She cannot sleep or eat and keeps breaking down, as she is so scared about what might happen to her beloved animals. These are important voices, which are sometimes being missed in the debate. The dogs are not just animals; they are actually members of the family, and to lose them will be heartbreaking.

Another constituent of mine, Rumi, talked to me about the special creature that has transformed his life. It is not just a dog; it is the child of his family and a source of endless joy and unconditional love—an incredible companion that understands his joys and sorrows and is always there to provide comfort when needed. The email I received from him is very emotional. I feel that it is part of my duty to speak on behalf of law-abiding people who cannot fathom the idea that they could become criminals. They have been experiencing immense stress and depression as a result of the proposed ban, and they have asked me to raise their cases in today's debate.

Another constituent of mine, Dimitar, talked about the loss and despair he has experienced over the past months. He is without a family and is here in the UK on his own. His mother died 16 months ago, and his father passed away shortly thereafter. Dimitar is suffering from immense grief and loneliness, and he feels that the only thing that has got him through this difficult time is the friendship and unconditional love that he has had from his dog. The prospect of losing that animal is immensely overpowering.

Another constituent of mine, Cathy Bibby—a grandmother of six, a law-abiding citizen, a homeowner, and one who has worked all her life—cannot countenance the fact that she could become a criminal for owning two American bullies; she feels that she is being treated like a criminal just for her choice of dogs. These dogs are not just the life of her, but the life of her family. She cannot countenance the fact that she could possibly be made a criminal. She said to me in her email that this has been incredibly tough to come to terms with and that her mental health is suffering.

Laura Creed, who led the campaign in Peterborough, is a decent and upstanding member of the community. I know she does not have a bad bone in her body, but she too has been made to feel that she could become a criminal. She has had her girl—a dog called Lady—for over 15 years. Lady is a rescue dog, who had suffered abuse. Lady has been kicked and abused but she has a gentle nature, and Laura cannot possibly think of losing her. We do not know how long they have left with Lady. She is not an XL bully, by the way, but she may fall under the characteristics set out in the legislation. The idea that Laura could lose Lady is just heartbreaking to her. At the end of the email, Laura says that there must be another way.

That is what I wanted to raise in this debate. Those are important voices. In my mind, these people—law-abiding, responsible dog owners—do not present a danger to the public. There has to be a way other than, effectively, giving people the choice of losing these dogs, placing further restrictions on the ownership of these dogs, or making these owners criminals. There are good intentions behind what is being proposed. No one can hear about the tragic incidents and deaths that have occurred and not want to act. The intentions are good, but are we to pass bad legislation as a result of those good intentions?

That is all I really wanted to say in the debate today. I urge the Minister to think and to listen to the voices of those law-abiding citizens—people who have never been in trouble with the law at any point in their life. Are we not doing something that, in a few years, we will look back on and regret?

5.57 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Caroline. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for so ably leading today's Petitions Committee debate. In my constituency of Southend West, 192 of my constituents signed the first e-petition, 642876, and a further 693 signed the e-petition ending in 611.

[MR JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

It is that first petition that I particularly want to speak about today. Specifically, I want to speak about the need for early intervention to prevent dog bites and other dog-related issues. The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I am going to focus on dog-on-dog attacks.

Recent estimates show that there are some 13 million dogs in the UK; we are literally a nation of dog lovers, with nearly half of all households owning a dog. We all know that dogs are not just pets; they are much loved members of the family and true companions. That was very much the case with a much loved bichon frisé called Millie, who was the constant companion of one of my constituents, Michael. The Minister knows that Millie was viciously attacked in Chalkwell Park in Southend-on-Sea. It is really as a result of that vicious dog-on-dog attack that I wished to speak today.

Most dog owners are responsible, but there must be consequences for the small minority who are not. It is clear to me that normally it is not the dogs that are the problem—although there may well be a legitimate need to single out the XL bully dog. Most dogs in themselves are not a problem, but dogs have owners, and every dog owner has a responsibility to ensure that their dog does

[Anna Firth]

not fatally attack another dog; they certainly have a responsibility to ensure that their dog does not attack a human being, let alone fatally attack someone. A growing cohort of evidence suggests that if we tackle dog-on-dog aggression and attacks, we might well prevent dogs from going on to attack other animals, adults or even children.

In recent years, laws both civil and criminal have been strengthened to protect the public when a dog poses a risk to public safety, whether in a public or a private place. It remains the case, however, under section 3(1) of the Dangerous Dogs Act, that a dog owner is not liable to any form of criminal prosecution when their dog fatally attacks or seriously injures another dog, unless that dog is a guide, assistance or service dog, unless their dog bites a human in the course of the attack, or unless—to quote guidance—there is “reasonable apprehension” that the dog will injure a person. That is not always the case, and certainly not when a larger dog, such as a boxer-type or XL bully dog, makes a beeline for a much smaller dog. That is exactly what happened in the case of my constituent.

In the previous Session, I had the privilege of promoting a ten-minute rule Bill that would have required a person in charge of a dog to take all reasonable steps to ensure that their dog did not fatally injure another dog—in other words, early intervention. It was called Emilie’s law. Sadly, the Bill fell when the House was prorogued, but that loophole still needs to be plugged. I have been inundated by emails from people all over the country expressing concerns about dangerous dogs attacking their dogs. I urge the Government to initiate an immediate review of existing legislation on dog attacks, with a view to amending the law to afford pet dogs the same protections that exist already under the law for service, guide and therapy dogs.

In preparation for my ten-minute rule Bill, I submitted freedom of information requests to all 43 police forces in the UK to ask if they record dog-on-dog attacks as a separate offence, and if they do, how many they had recorded over the past five years. I was shocked that only 14 police forces record dog-on-dog attacks as a separate incident and that, in those 14 areas, the number of dog-on-dog attacks has increased exponentially. In 2016, the 14 police forces reported and recorded 1,700 dog-on-dog attacks; in 2021, five years later, those same forces recorded 11,559 attacks. That is a 700% increase, with a shocking 2,264 attacks in London alone. I intend to resubmit those freedom of information requests, because I suspect that with all the media coverage of such incidents, the number will have increased still further.

I urge the Government to take notice of some of these terrible stories, in particular those of Millie and Michael in my constituency, because of the long-standing mental-health issues that such attacks cause. Even though it is now nearly two years ago since Millie was savagely attacked by an off-the-lead, out-of-control dog while on a walk on the lead in a rose garden in Chalkwell Park, Michael is still deeply affected by the attack. He still comes to see me and is very upset that Emilie’s law has fallen.

That is not atypical. Such attacks, when people irresponsibly allow their dogs to become dangerous and to attack other people’s dogs, have a lasting impact. It is

the responsibility of owners to take necessary steps to ensure that we do not have such horrendous, unnecessary attacks. Millie was pretty much torn apart in front of Michael’s eyes. He had to carry her, bleeding and with serious open wounds to her abdomen, to the nearest vet to be euthanised. He had no recourse whatever, because he did not feel that he himself was at risk. It was obvious the dog was going for Millie; he did not feel under any reasonable apprehension of injury. The test is worded as an objective test, but it is interpreted by police forces as a subjective test, and that is the essence of the problem.

Part of my Bill would have required all police forces to record incidents where a dog has attacked another dog. Recording such incidents remains hugely important, because until we have the full picture and can assess the true impact of dog-on-dog attacks, we cannot take the next step of predicting whether attacking another dog is the first step towards attacking a human, including children, or another pet.

Protect Our Pets, which is a large Facebook campaign group, advises me that dog-on-dog attacks are nearly always the precursor to an attack on a human or another pet, so reporting in this area will allow for early intervention. Hopefully, it will also allow us to prevent some of these awful attacks, some of which are fatal. I urge the Government once again to look closely at the provisions of Emilie’s law and to work with me to make sure that we have all the necessary measures in place to prevent dog-on-dog attacks, so that people like Michael do not have to suffer the unnecessary loss of their beloved pets.

6.6 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure, Mr Gray, to serve under your chairmanship and to participate in this excellent debate.

What concerns me is that 600,000-plus people have signed the main petition that we are debating today, and on 31 October the Government laid a statutory instrument under the negative procedure, so unless the Government agree to a debate under that negative procedure, this will be the last opportunity for Members of this House to express an opinion on this sensitive subject.

To try to prompt the Government into holding a debate, I have today tabled an early-day motion praying against the statutory instrument. It asks:

“That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, praying that the Dangerous Dogs (Designated Types) (England and Wales) Order 2023 (S.I., 2023, No. 1164), dated 31 October 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 31 October 2023, be annulled.”

When my right hon. Friend the Minister responds to this debate, if he does not agree to withdraw the order and think again in the light of this debate, I hope that he will allow a debate on this very sensitive statutory instrument. We are a lawmaking body and at the moment we have a statutory instrument that has been laid and that will come into force automatically, the drafting of which leaves much to be desired, not least because it does not have any clear or precise definition of what an XL bully dog is and a requirement under the 1991 Act is that there should be such a definition in any subsidiary legislation.

This whole debate takes me back to 1991 and the circumstances in which the dangerous dogs legislation was introduced. I was a junior Minister at that time and

I owned a rottweiler, which frequently used to come into the precincts of the Palace of Westminster, in the days when there was no ban on dogs, of whatever breed, coming into the Palace. My wife, who worked for me then and continues to work for me, and I used to look after this rottweiler within the precincts of this House when we were here working.

In 1991, the late Dame Angela Rumbold was charged as a Home Office Minister to make an urgent reaction to public concern being expressed about dog attacks on children, largely by rottweilers, that were being reported in the press. It became apparent that a distorted picture of the pattern of dog attacks and the dog breeds responsible for those attacks was emerging. I think there are 22,000 incidents of dogs biting humans every year, and if the dog concerned in an incident was of a particular breed that was under focus at that time, then that resulted in a report in the newspapers, which would not happen otherwise.

As a result of pressure put on the Minister from within Government by the late Alan Clark—he was the only other member of the House who had a rottweiler and he was also a Minister at the time—and I, we were able to persuade Dame Angela that, as she could see from our rottweilers, they were not inherently dangerous dogs that should be banned and whose owners should be effectively criminalised if they did not take action. I remind the House of that.

What happened after that? In the context of that debate, Alastair Campbell—when he was running the *Daily Mirror*—thought it would make a very good story, because he found out that I had rottweiler, to show me going out with my rottweiler and walking on Southampton common, and thereby endangering everybody else on the common. He paid for one of his junior staff to camp outside my house in Southampton—I was then representing Southampton, Itchen—to try and see me, or somebody else, going out on to Southampton common with our rottweiler so that he could take a picture of it. He failed to do that because we were alert to the risk, but that did not stop him putting an article in the *Daily Mirror* referring to me and describing my rottweiler as a “Minister’s devil dog”, with a picture of our dear rottie.

That was the emotion at the time, and it was being played up by what was then Her Majesty’s official Opposition. I think that contributed to the Government rushing into what was essentially emergency legislation. I fear that, with the Prime Minister’s announcement and the announcements that have followed, the current Government are similarly being pushed into doing something perhaps against their better judgment, in a rush, and without thinking it through properly.

Particularly, if we are going to ban a particular type or breed of dog, then we need a robust definition. We cannot leave it to individual owners to decide for themselves whether their dog complies with the new definitions. The Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), said that there are people whose XL bullies fit that: their parents were registered as XL bullies, and so on. That is fine, but what we are discussing today is a situation where a lot of dogs, which were never bought or officially described as XL bullies, may well be caught by this legislation because it is so vaguely drafted. To then have guidance that says, “If you think that you may be in this

category, then you should self-police and report yourself to the authorities, because you think you may have what is described as an XL bully-type”—that is just not the way in which we should be legislating in this House.

I also fear that this debate is undermined by the lack of data. There is no hard data on how many dog bites, resulting in either fatality or serious injury, in this country have come from different breeds of dog. I used that great resource, the internet, and came across a website, askadamskutner.com, that gives us these statistics for what happens in America. The most recent statistics by breed for dog bite-related fatalities included the following: pit bulls, 284 deaths; rottweilers, 45 deaths; German shepherds, 20 deaths; mixed breeds, 17 deaths; American bully dogs, 15 deaths; mastiffs, 14 deaths; and Siberian huskies, 13 deaths—the list goes on. After those statistics, however, the major finding is that Adam Kutner believes that irresponsible ownership to be responsible for most of these dog bite-related fatalities.

Sir Robert Goodwill: We have statistics in the UK showing that 12 of the last 23 deaths were from American XLs. Other breeds are not blameless. In fact, on 8 August, a 77-year-old gentleman, Mr Vic Franklin, was bitten by two rottweilers and had to have an arm, leg and part of a finger amputated following the attack. There are other breeds, but they do not feature disproportionately in the statistics.

Sir Christopher Chope: The problem is that the statistics are of a moment. My right hon. Friend is talking about the statistics over recent months, but if one looks back at statistics since 1991, they might be able to show that there have been a number of rottweiler attacks, and rottweilers were exempt from the dangerous dogs legislation in the circumstances that I have described. We are now picking on a particular breed—and not even a precise definition of that breed—instead of doing what all informed opinion has been asking for, which is to look back at the legislation itself and legislate against those who have allowed their dogs, of whatever breed, to get out of control and attack other dogs or humans.

It is telling that about a year ago, in response to a petition asking for the Government to review the dangerous dogs legislation, the Government set up a review because they recognised that there might be a problem with the current legislation. However, as soon as there were a few headlines about XL bullies, in what I think was a knee-jerk reaction, the Prime Minister decided, “I must take action on this and so I must announce a ban.” That ban comes into effect on 31 December, with, as I have described, the legislation laid and no opportunity whatsoever for the Government or Parliament to consider the detail of it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) said that we need to continue to look at these issues and ensure that there is an iterative process. There is no iterative process now. The statutory instrument has been laid and will come into law on 31 December, unless or until this House forces the Government to bring forward a motion so we can then vote it down, or the Government themselves decide to withdraw it and think again.

We are talking about desperate measures, imposed in an autocratic style over a short space of time, with challenging consequences for our constituents up and

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

down the country. Members on both sides of the House have referred to individual constituents who have written to them. A number of mine have written to me in very persuasive and emotional letters and emails explaining why their particular dog should not have to be muzzled, or ultimately even euthanised, as a result of this legislation, which they think is totally disproportionate.

One particular person who wrote to me is the owner of a mastiff cross, which he and his wife believe may satisfy the definition of an XL bully as contained in the guidance issued by the Government. Why should somebody with a mastiff cross find their dog defined as an XL bully type when it is not? It just happens to be a large and thickset dog. That family took the dog from a rescue centre about five years ago following a family disaster, and it has been their way out of a difficult, mentally stressful situation. Given that they may find that their dog will no longer have the freedom to walk through the New Forest, on beaches, or in the hills of Dartmoor as a normal dog would, one can understand how upset they are. The dog, who is called Ronnie, is not an XL bully but could be classed as one under this vague and imprecise legislation.

My daughter was born in 1990, and when she was one—at the time of the Dangerous Dogs Act—she was living with our rottweiler. I think that was another factor that Angela Rumbold took into account, because here was a rottweiler—a so-called dangerous dog—living a perfectly quiet existence in the same household as one of Her Majesty’s Ministers.

I do not know whether it was because of the legislation, but my daughter ultimately became a member of the esteemed veterinary profession. She is now part of the cohort of experts who are saying, “This is not the right way forward.” They have said that the Government’s legislation is completely the wrong way to go about it, so why are the Government not listening? It is perhaps—dare one say it?—the arrogance of having too large a majority, or deference to the Prime Minister, who decreed that this will happen on the basis of little evidence at the time. In scrambling to get the evidence together, Ministers perhaps feel that they have to deliver on the Prime Minister’s will, rather than stand up to him and say, “Hang on a minute. I think your knee-jerk reaction was wrong.”

The people concerned about the ban, including vets, are in the Dog Control Coalition, which is made up of the RSPCA, Blue Cross, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Dogs Trust, Hope Rescue, the Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Royal Kennel Club and the British Veterinary Association. They say:

“The Dog Control Coalition agrees that urgent action needs to be taken to protect the public from out-of-control dogs”—

not specific breeds—

“but we are disappointed that the Government hasn’t taken the opportunity to completely overhaul the Dangerous Dogs Act. With its continued focus on specific breeds, rather than a focus on prevention and implementation of tougher penalties for those owners not in control of their dogs, it is not fit for purpose.”

Those organisations say that this legislation is not fit for purpose, and yet the Government—unless we hear something to the contrary from the Minister—will not even allow the House to have a vote on it so that

Members can be held to account by their constituents and express whether they think it is good legislation or not.

Even if the intention of the legislation is good, surely we should look at the detail, because we are talking about new criminal penalties that will affect people’s freedom. Do we want to criminalise owning or handling dogs of a description so vague that people will not be certain in advance whether they will be offending by not registering their dog as being an XL bully type?

In my view, this is one of the worst pieces of legislation brought forward by this Government—that is quite a high bar to get over, given what has happened since the 2019 general election. I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) introduced the debate in such a mild, rational way that he would single-handedly persuade the Government to think again. My style is perhaps slightly different from his, but I hope that between us we will be able to persuade the Government and, ultimately, the Prime Minister, because nothing can be changed unless he says so, to change their view and listen to the voices of the 600,000-plus people who signed the petitions.

Mr Gray, you and I know how difficult it is to get people to sign petitions, so to get 600,000 signatures is no mean feat. We ignore that mass of opinion at our peril, unless we are able to show that we have done everything possible to examine alternative ways of dealing with this problem and introduced proper safeguards in terms of definitions. Ultimately, we must recognise the plea that has been there ever since the 1991 legislation that we should not legislate in haste, but should actually deal with the underlying problem. That problem is just as bad as it has ever been, which is that there is a significant number of dog owners who are irresponsible.

Some people have talked about having a licensing system for dogs. Perhaps we should have a licensing system for dog owners in the same way that we have one for car drivers. Why not have a licensing system for dog owners? I put that forward as a proposition. I do not normally campaign in favour of more legislation and regulation, but I put that forward as a reasonable alternative to the rotten legislation we have here.

6.26 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gray. I thank all everyone who added their names to the petitions and thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for leading the debate today. We have heard passionate and emotive contributions from across the House, and those present will know that this matter has caused genuine concern across all quarters of civic society, with strong feelings on all sides. Those who think the breed should be banned, those who do not, animal lovers, academics, animal charities and welfare groups, and many more stakeholders have all had their say on the proposed ban.

The proposal comes in the wake of what has been an undeniable spate of attacks on other animals and people. Of course, we all share the horror of any dog attack, especially with higher numbers of reported cases of XL bully-related incidents. Some of those reports, as we have heard, have been truly horrific and have resulted in fatalities. As outlined by the Chair of the Environment,

Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), our Committee has heard hours of oral evidence and read hundreds of pages on the matter, as well as receiving many constituent inquiries. It is apparent that the rushed nature of the ban has only exacerbated public concern. The Dangerous Dogs Act is, in the view of many, a flawed piece of legislation, and adding the XL bully to it in this rushed fashion has caused concern for many stakeholders and interested parties.

The Scottish Government have fully and carefully considered the UK Government's decision to ban XL bully dogs and whether similar changes to ban the breed will be applied in Scotland. Having listened to the advice given by advisers—experts in the field, of course—it has been made clear by the Scottish Government Minister in a recent letter to Lord Benyon that the ban will not be brought into force in Scotland on the current timescale the UK Government have implemented. The Scottish Government keep all dog control legislation under constant and consistent review, including the banned breeds list, and will continue to do so going forward.

The focus in Scotland for some considerable time has been on dog control policy. Supported by the Scottish SPCA, the view is that responsible dog ownership, whatever the breed, is the key to safer communities. However, if the long-standing list of banned breeds can have a role to play in keeping communities safe, the Scottish Government will of course consider that, using the evidence of what may work without having any unintended consequences. It is those unintended consequences, such as mistyping a dog, that could see innocent, well-trained, well-looked-after and much-loved family pets caught up in the ban as the legislation is rushed through this place.

Defining exactly what breed types should be covered by a ban is the key challenge facing the UK Government. They have set up an expert group on this very subject, which will also help inform decision making in Scotland, and any departure from the current position will be considered fully. Again, those of us who sit on the EFRA Committee will have heard all about the implications of attempting to type a dog and how difficult it is, even for experts. The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) raised many valid concerns about typing dogs, and it reminded me of reading a book by the English rugby player Lawrence Dallaglio. His family pet was a Rhodesian ridgeback, which attacked his eight-year-old son way back in 2008. They are big dogs with have excessive weight, and if they lock on, it will lead to the same consequences as what happens when an XL bully-type dog does so, so we have concerns about targeting specific breeds.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Is the hon. Gentleman not concerned that this sort of attack also happens in Scotland? In Motherwell last month, the 18-year-old owner of an XL bully was savagely attacked and needed surgery, and two council officials were also attacked. Pepper spray needed to be used on the dog before it was put down.

Steven Bonnar: Of course I share the concerns. I do not think anybody in this Chamber or, indeed, across the whole House does not share the concerns about irresponsible dog ownership and what can happen,

including fatalities, when somebody is not acting responsibly—of course we share those concerns. Motherwell is my local town, by the way, so I am deeply concerned about that incident, but the Scottish Government have carefully considered the evidence-based suggestions from experts to help improve community safety, including keeping the prohibited breed list under constant review. We will continue to engage with all stakeholders on the concept of a ban and how it might be implemented in England and Wales.

The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 was designed to highlight the responsibilities of dog owners by putting in place a regime that identifies “out of control” dogs at an early juncture and provides measures to change the behaviour of such dogs and their owners before they are deemed dangerous. The UK Government should perhaps look to follow the approach taken by the Scottish Government. We in Scotland have also introduced a national dog control database, which helps independent enforcement agencies, such as local authorities and Police Scotland, to access information on dog owners who allow their dogs to be out of control in a public place.

The Scottish Government also carried out a marketing campaign on dog control in conjunction with the Scottish SPCA in 2021. That campaign has since been rerun on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and all other available outlets on a number of occasions. It directs the public to information about the law on controlling dogs, which is available at mygov.scot/controlling-your-dog. That website makes it clear that dog owners are responsible for the actions of their dog, and sets out potential penalties for those failing to control dogs. These actions are not reactions to a spate of dog attacks by Dobermanns or rottweilers, as the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) outlined. The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was rushed legislation following a spate of dog attacks, and that is what we are seeing from the UK Government again. This is not consistent. Scotland is not reacting to a spate of dog attacks, and a consistent and continuous body of work has been, and continues to be, undertaken in Scotland that can not only help to react to trends, but actively prevent them.

It is regretful that the Government have brought forward this ban in this manner, without, again, any prior conversation or consultation with the devolved Government. It is also important to emphasise to those concerned that a dog being classed as a banned breed will not automatically mean that the animal will be put down. If conditions are met, such as having a dog neutered or spayed and keeping that dog muzzled in public, a dog could be placed on the new index of exempted dogs.

More generally, it is important to put on record just how much we in the SNP value the work of Police Scotland, Scottish local authorities and the Scottish SPCA, which all work closely with the Scottish Government to help keep our communities safe from the small minority of irresponsible dog owners and their dangerous dogs. The Scottish Government will, of course, continue to work closely with the United Kingdom Government on their intentions for a ban of the XL bully breed, while continuing to lead on several regional engagements to look at ways for partners to work collaboratively to improve the operational response, enforcement and community engagement to promote more responsible dog ownership across our communities. Here at Westminster,

[Steven Bonnar]

we in the SNP will continue to call on the UK Government to return the kept animals Bill to Parliament, to restrict unethical puppy farming and imports from abroad, and to improve our welfare standards for all animals.

6.36 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on behalf of the Opposition. As everyone can see and hear, I am not the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones)—I do not have the same beautiful Welsh accent. My shadow Department colleague is in the Chamber due to a clash of business, so I am speaking for the Opposition today. My hon. Friend sends her good wishes to one and all here, and I know she will read *Hansard* tomorrow.

I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for opening the debate on these two important petitions, and for setting a considered and careful tone, which has been continued throughout the debate—my congratulations on that. I also acknowledge all the colleagues who have spoken, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), whose contributions I always enjoy. He recognised how emotive this issue is and how much these pets mean to so many people, and that although views are different, we cannot base any kind of ban just on what a dog looks like. That point has been echoed throughout the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) shared her upset over the attacks—I am sure we all echo that—and spoke of her concerns about the current legislation not working. An important point was made about the problem of whether the definition we use is too woolly.

I enjoyed some of the comments from Government Members, particularly the point made by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) that the Government, with too large a majority, may appear overly arrogant. I promise that the Opposition are doing everything we can to deal with that, one by-election at a time. More seriously, he made an important point about the imprecision of legislation. The expertise of the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson), as a vet, has really contributed to the debate. It was the first time I have heard of ear cropping and I share his horror at that awful, awful practice.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). Despite our various disagreements, she should be commended for coming here, having faced death threats over her stance on this issue, to defend the legislation that she brought forward. I am utterly appalled by any Member of Parliament—anybody—facing death threats for standing up for what they believe. There might be differences of opinion, but surely we are here to debate them all in a calm and considered manner. That, of course, always comes from the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who also mentioned the problems around definitions. So thank you, everyone.

Very importantly, I acknowledge and thank all those up and down the country who signed this petition. When I first started drafting these remarks, more than 600,000 people had signed e-petition 624876, and more than 100,000 people had signed the alternative one.

I pay tribute to the person who started the petition. It is very important that these issues are debated. It shows that the petition system is working effectively for our democracy. It is healthy that people can use a petition to share their views and that we bring it here to debate it, and I commend every person who signed it. It is important that we take the time to acknowledge the issues that our constituents really care about.

I also note that a number of Members from across the House have a keen interest in this issue and have campaigned and worked on it for many years. I mention especially my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who has been a doughty and loud campaigner. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West is very grateful for his advice, experience and work.

My hon. Friend, the shadow animal welfare Minister, said that

“the Labour party believes in honouring our animal welfare promises, and we will always push for the strongest possible animal welfare policies.”—[*Official Report*, 9 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 135WH.]

We are, as was mentioned, a nation of animal lovers, and pets are part of all our families. That also means that ensuring that dogs are not left or encouraged to become a danger to themselves, their owners, other animals or other people, and it means, as has been mentioned, that owners are responsible and should care for their dogs and treat them in a humane and respectful way.

Like many on this side of the House, I have been deeply concerned by the rise in dog-on-human attacks in recent weeks and months. It is clear that action is needed to improve the Dangerous Dogs Act and for that action to be taken sooner rather than later. The point has come up many times in this debate that we should not look at the Act in isolation, but as part of a wider piece in regard to the legislation, because piecemeal legislation can result in unintended consequences.

It is obvious to us all that dog attacks have increased in number in the 32 years since the Dangerous Dogs Act came into force. Unfortunately, when we talk about the threats posed by dangerous dogs, the facts speak for themselves. From January to July 2020, 7,790 dog attacks occurred across the UK. Just two years later, for the same period, there were 9,834 attacks, which represents a 26% increase. The number of deaths caused by dogs is also very bleak: since 2013, there have been more than five deaths a year, yet last year, 10 people lost their life. I acknowledge the presence today of those who have lost loved ones and who desperately need common sense to win the day. I thank again the hon. Member for Don Valley for mentioning Emma and the death threats and abuse that she has faced. I agree that they are utterly appalling. She has been through enough.

There are a number of reasons why dog attacks have increased recently. It is also the case that dog ownership increased markedly during the covid pandemic. The People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals stated that from February 2021 to February 2022, dog ownership figures increased significantly so that—this amazed me when I looked it up—27% of UK adults owned a dog and the UK’s dog population stood at 10.2 million.

Back in 2018, just a short period after my election to this place, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee launched a report that called for a full-scale

review of current dog control legislation and policy to ensure that the public were properly protected and animal welfare concerns were effectively addressed. More specifically, the report made 16 recommendations to the Government, the most important of which can be summarised as follows. It called for an end to

“the prohibition on transferring a banned dog if it has been...assessed...and found to be safe.”

It called for a commission to be established to ascertain whether the four banned breeds presented a

“greater risk than any legal breed or cross breed.”

It called for a review of current legislation and policy relating to dogs, and for the development of

“an alternative model that focuses on prevention through education, early intervention, and consistently robust sanctions for offenders”.

I would be grateful if the Minister could give us a progress check on the response to that report and an update. It would also be helpful to know what discussions he has had with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales about their approach to this issue, because, as has been mentioned, the legislation covers only England and Wales. It is clear that a joined-up approach to handling this issue will be required and, more specifically, to how we respond across the United Kingdom, not just from an enforcement perspective.

I would like to touch on the first petition, on the American XL bully. As Members across the House will know, Ministers recently announced that they would add the American XL bully to the list of dogs that are banned under the Dangerous Dogs Act. There are currently four breeds on that list: the pit bull terrier, the Japanese tosa—I am going to say these terribly—the dogo argentino and the fila brasileiro. The current approach to dog control in this country is misguided and does not protect people adequately. We in the Opposition believe that safety must be our top priority, but without unnecessarily punishing responsible dog owners or harming dogs that are not necessarily a risk. A common-sense approach is required, and it is for Ministers to make sure that they deliver one.

I pay tribute to the RSPCA for its work on this and on animal welfare more generally. I very much agreed when it said that, in light of recent serious dog-bite incidents, increased enforcement is necessary to improve human safety, and expressed deep concern for anyone impacted by those tragic incidents.

A knee-jerk reaction—calling for the speedy introduction of a ban on a particular breed—is all well and good, but there are wider implications that must be factored in. The Minister will have heard a number of comments regarding rehoming, and I am keen to know what discussions he has had about that. What will be done to make sure that dogs are not put down because they cannot be rehomed? How can we make sure that a ban will not lead to a very sudden and steep increase in abandonment and stray dogs because owners are worried about the cost of complying with the restrictions? As was mentioned at the beginning of the debate, how this is being communicated to current dog owners?

Will the Minister take a moment to address a specific point that has come up a lot? The RSPCA and other campaign groups are right to point out that the definition of XL bully is very broad indeed. I am extremely concerned about the number of healthy, much loved dogs that will unnecessarily be swept up in the ban. The Minister

needs to get a grip on that. As he knows, the animal rescue and veterinary sectors are both under considerable strain and pressure following the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, and there are major concerns about costs and an increased number of animals coming into the sectors' care. What support are we providing to vets to make sure that they are able to assist and respond to the impact of the ban?

There is much to do to get this right from both a public safety perspective and an animal welfare perspective. I urge the Minister to reach out, listen, and engage with campaigners, stakeholders and owners and the valid concerns that have been raised in this debate. Will he set out what meetings he has had with stakeholders and campaigners on this issue? Engagement and communication with the dog and animal welfare sector will be key to getting this right. The Minister needs to go further, do more, and listen harder.

I have already touched on the need for a real root-and-branch unpicking of dog legislation in this country. The year 1991 seems a very long time ago now. It is right to listen, learn, review and improve, and I urge the Minister to do just that. Will he commit to a full and total review of dog control legislation in this country? If he will, when will it happen? I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West will be very happy to have an answer in writing if the Minister is not able to answer that specific question or any of the others I have put to him.

6.47 pm

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I am responding on behalf of Lord Benyon, the Minister responsible, who sits in another place.

We have seen the House at its very best today. We have had an informed debate in which a series of Members have wrestled with the challenge the Government faces of keeping people safe in our communities while at the same time making sure we do not affect people's much loved pets. The debate was informed and enriched, not least by the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), who added a great deal to the debate with her presence, and by the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), who has done a lot of work in this area. I knew when I saw my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) that I was about to be challenged on dog-on-dog attacks, as she is a tenacious campaigner. I know her constituent Michael will be very pleased to see her in her place representing poor old Millie, who suffered terribly in a dog-on-dog attack. I pay tribute to her for the work she does. We have had some great contributions.

We should stop and pause, as my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) did at the start of the debate, to recognise that dog attacks can have horrific consequences. The Government take that very seriously indeed. Sadly, we have seen an increase in serious and fatal dog attacks in recent years. The XL bully breed-type appears to have been disproportionately involved in that rise in attacks. That is why we have taken decisive action to ban the XL bully breed-type, to attempt to keep our communities safe. From 1 February 2024,

[*Mark Spencer*]

it will be illegal for someone to be in possession of an XL bully breed-type unless they have a certificate of exemption.

We recognise the strength of feeling on breed-specific legislation, and that some people are opposed to the prohibition of specific breed-types. However, the Government must balance those views with our responsibility to protect public safety. We remain concerned that lifting any restrictions may result in more dog attacks. Therefore, there are no plans to repeal the breed-specific provisions in the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

Police and local authorities already have a range of powers available to them to tackle dangerous dogs and irresponsible dog ownership across all breeds of dog. Those powers range from lower level community protection notices, which require dog owners to take appropriate action to address behaviour, to more serious offences under the 1991 Act, whereby people can be put in prison for up to 14 years or disqualified from ownership, or dangerous dogs can be euthanised. We are working closely with enforcers to make sure that the full force of the law is applied to incidents involving all breeds of dog.

Of course, we know that dog attacks are complex and that there is no single silver bullet. That is why, alongside the ban, we are taking a multi-factoral approach to reducing dog attacks through our responsible dog ownership taskforce. The taskforce is considering the role of education and training for both dogs and their owners, and how we can improve data collection, recording and enforcement practices. We expect the taskforce to make its final recommendations very soon. In the meantime, DEFRA officials have been collaborating with the police and local authorities to deliver sessions to share best practice in preventive dog control enforcement and to encourage multi-agency working. We have been co-ordinating communications—for example, we can co-ordinate communication pushes with key partners, so that families are equipped with practical tips about how to enjoy spending time safely with dogs. This messaging has been widely disseminated to parents, health visitors, school nurses, safeguarding professionals, police forces and local authorities.

More widely, we are actively considering whether action is required to further protect dogs in breeding settings. As part of that work, we are reviewing the regulations for anyone in the business of breeding and selling dogs, and we have commissioned a report from the Animal Welfare Committee on the welfare implications of specialised canine reproductive practices.

I hope that colleagues are reassured that the Government are taking this issue very seriously and that this wide-ranging action is necessary to ensure continued public safety. I look forward to discussing the conclusions of the responsible dog ownership taskforce in due course. I wish to put on the record my thanks to everyone who has contributed to the debate today.

Sir Christopher Chope: Will my right hon. Friend the Minister facilitate a debate on the statutory instrument, which is obviously of great concern to many Members of Parliament and even more so to our constituents, before it comes into force on 31 December?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Of course he will be fully aware that it is for parliamentary business managers to arrange such debates, but I will certainly have a conversation with those business managers following this debate. However, I think the House is now more informed, thanks to this debate, and I thank Members from all parties for their constructive contributions to it.

6.54 pm

Nick Fletcher: I agree with the Minister that this has been an extremely well informed and well attended debate, which has obviously gone on for quite some time.

There is still work to be done, and concerns remain on both sides of the debate. I encourage all dog owners to be extremely responsible with their pets. When dogs bite, often the first thing that people say is, “Well, it’s never done that before.” Unfortunately with some breeds, even if it has never done it before, the first time can be fatal, and we really have to consider that.

There is a huge amount of interest in this issue. I know we are a dog-loving nation, but I do not want to have to sit in front of a parent who has lost a child, or talk to a father whose daughter has scars on her legs for the rest of her life, because of a dog attack. That is what we need to stop.

A great deal is being done, however, and I am pleased to hear that the Department is doing a lot of work on responsible ownership. I have spoken to many professionals, and whether they agree with the ban or not, they accept that it is going forward; however, they do not want to be in the same place in five or 10 years’ time because we have not done anything about responsible ownership.

We also need a database and we need to enforce the chipping of dogs. We need a register of every bite incident, because one of the concerns about banning the XL bully is that there is no real data on how many bites and fatalities are associated with the dog. If we have a database and this happens with another dog in five or 10 years’ time, we can turn around to the public and say, “Look, we’ve really got the facts.”

I thank everybody who has contributed. The debate will continue on social media, and I echo what others said about my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey): that behaviour really should not happen. To everybody watching this debate, let me say that Members of this House are doing this job for the right reason: they want to make this country safe and this world a better place for us all to live in. If we take away this arena for debate because Members have been threatened, that would be a travesty. We really must keep the dialogue respectful, and that includes the petitioners, the mums and dads of children who have been affected, and those on the other side of the argument.

I thank all hon. Members once again, and I thank you, Mr Gray. I also thank the Petitions Committee, which does a huge amount of work. It is an honour to lead these debates.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 624876 and 643611 relating to legislation in respect of dangerous dogs.

6.57 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 27 November 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Advanced Manufacturing Plan and UK Battery Strategy

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kemi Badenoch): Last week, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) announced a £4.5 billion package of support for the manufacturing sector as part of our focus on growth and investment. Today, I am pleased to publish the Government's Advanced Manufacturing Plan and UK Battery Strategy, backed by £3 billion from this package of support. Over £2 billion will support the growth of the UK's automotive industry, and £975 million will be committed to the aerospace industry.

Advanced Manufacturing Plan

Manufacturing plays a vital role in the UK's economy. The UK is a global hub for advanced manufacturing, recently overtaking France as the 8th largest manufacturing nation. The Government's ambition is to build on these strengths and to make the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a manufacturing business.

The Government have a strong record of helping the sector to thrive. Our approach has led to significant investment successes—Tata has announced a £4 billion gigafactory, and this week Nissan announced it is leading up to £2 billion of new investment to produce two new electric vehicle models in Sunderland. Already, we are the most attractive destination in Europe in terms of strategically significant foreign direct investment (FDI) according to EY, and we must keep it that way.

Last week's package of measures further cements our commitment to the sector. Today, I am pleased to outline the Government's complete Advanced Manufacturing Plan, which details the Government's three key priorities: investing in the long-term future of manufacturing, co-operating internationally and building supply chain resilience; and reducing costs and removing barriers to boost competitiveness. The plan is to be further augmented by:

A new industry Hydrogen Taskforce to set strategic direction for the potential use of hydrogen propulsion systems and manufacturing opportunities for the UK.

Exploring the establishment of a manufacturing observatory which would aim to build our capability with industry and researchers on manufacturing evidence and analysis.

Negotiations on a critical minerals agreement, as part of the Atlantic Declaration announced by the Prime Minister and President Biden in June, to enable those minerals extracted or processed in the UK to count toward sourcing requirements for clean vehicles eligible for tax credits under the US Inflation Reduction Act.

The establishment of an industry forum, supported by a call for evidence, on access to finance for manufacturers to identify the market failures, constraints, and barriers that the sector is facing to unlock additional investment for advanced manufacturing.

Our response to Professor Dame Angela McLean's Pro-Innovation Regulation of Technologies Review: Advanced Manufacturing, which focuses on how regulation and standards can drive innovation and growth.

A new Grid Connections Action Plan with Ofgem that will help to reduce the average delay a project faces to connect to the transmission network from five years to six months.

The Advanced Manufacturing Plan is also supported by a range of measures in the autumn statement including a commitment to make full expensing permanent. This will allow businesses to invest for less, representing a tax cut to companies of over £10 billion a year and increasing total business investment by £14 billion over the forecast period or £3 billion per year.

UK Battery Strategy

Alongside the Advanced Manufacturing Plan, I am also publishing the UK's first Battery Strategy. Battery demand is one of the highest growth clean energy sectors in the world and the UK is well placed to reap the rewards due to its research expertise, its thriving automotive sector and its leading electric vehicle battery start-up ecosystem.

Our vision is for the UK to achieve a globally competitive battery supply chain by 2030 and to be a world leader in sustainable design, manufacture, and use of batteries. In the strategy, I am pleased to announce a range of measures to support the UK battery industry, including:

As outlined at autumn statement and in the Advanced Manufacturing Plan, committing £2 billion of capital and R&D funding for zero emission vehicles, batteries and their supply chains to 2030, building on the work of the Automotive Transformation Fund and the Advanced Propulsion Centre.

Investing an additional £50 million to enhance the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre's development facilities; boosting its capability for R&D in new chemistries and future technologies and in an Advanced Materials Battery Industrialisation Centre in the west midlands and north-east to bridge the gap between laboratory research and commercial production; bringing total Government investment in the Faraday Battery Challenge to over £600 million.

Developing pro-growth battery regulation to support the circular economy. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is committed to publishing a consultation and call for evidence as early as possible in 2024.

Expanding market access for the trade of critical minerals and promoting high international standards in supply chains when negotiating new free trade agreements.

Across our manufacturing sectors, I have been clear that we do not intend to enter a distortive subsidy battle with other economies. The UK's access to rules-based, free trade through our growing trade agreement portfolio is key to our offer as the best place to do business and for internationally mobile investment. Already, we have signed trade deals with Australia, New Zealand, CPTPP—with more on the way.

The UK has a proud manufacturing heritage. The Advanced Manufacturing Plan and UK Battery Strategy are a major step forward in ensuring its continued long-term success.

I shall place copies of the Advanced Manufacturing Plan and the UK Battery Strategy in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS68]

TREASURY

North East Investment Zone

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): On Friday, the Government and the forthcoming north-east mayoral combined authority jointly announced that the north-east investment zone will focus on advanced manufacturing and green industries, building on the region's long-standing sectoral strengths and increasing prominence as an international hub for clean energy. Aligned to the arc of innovation—running from Northumberland down to Sunderland and Durham, with opportunities along the Tyne corridor—the north-east investment zone builds on the trailblazer deal announced for the north-east and will bring benefits to businesses and local communities across the whole of the region.

Furthermore, a new Nissan-led investment worth £2 billion is being made into the north-east to develop two new electric vehicle models. This will create demand for a major expansion in the local electric vehicle supply chain, which the investment zone could support.

Building on the region's existing strengths, including as a world leader in automotive and advanced manufacturing, electric vehicle production, battery manufacturing, the offshore wind sector and advanced low-carbon materials, together with its strong natural assets and strategic geographic location, the north-east investment zone will bring opportunity into the region through a total funding envelope of £160 million over 10 years, following the extension of the investment zones programme that was confirmed at autumn statement 2023. The investment zone has been developed with strong support from the region's universities and Catapult centres and is aligned to their existing research and innovation excellence. Local partners expect that the investment zone will help leverage significant private funding, including the £2 billion Nissan-led investment announced on Friday, and help support more than 4,000 jobs over the first five years of the programme.

The Government, the forthcoming north-east mayoral combined authority and other local partners will continue to work together on the investment zone to jointly agree the outstanding elements of the programme, including the breakdown of how the north-east investment zone's funding envelope will be deployed, with a view to setting out further details in due course.

[HCWS71]

HOME DEPARTMENT

UEFA Men's European Championship: Licensing Hours

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): The UEFA Men's European Championship will take place from 14 June to 14 July 2024.

I am pleased to launch a consultation on extending licensing hours in England and Wales for certain matches—specifically the semi-final and final—of the 2024 UEFA European Championship contingent on the England men's national football team, the Wales men's national football team and/or the Scotland men's national football team playing in those matches. The consultation is aimed

at members of the public, local licensing authorities, licensed premises, and other interested parties in England and Wales where these proposals apply.

The extension would ensure that licenced premises in England and Wales wishing to host a viewing of the match and potential post-match celebrations are able to do so.

The Government propose to make a licensing hours order under section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003 which would contingently extend opening hours on the days of the semi-final on 9 and/or 10 July and the final on 14 July so that they would end at 01:00—for example, early in the morning after the matches have taken place rather than 23:00 on the day of the matches—for the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises and the provision of regulated entertainment in licensed premises in England and Wales.

The extension would be contingent on England, Wales and/or Scotland reaching those stages of the championship and would not take effect should none of those teams reach those stages of the tournament. I am seeking to use a contingent order to ensure that there is sufficient time to publicly consult on the proposed extension and follow the required parliamentary procedure.

A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and made available on www.gov.uk. The consultation will run until 19 February 2024.

[HCWS69]

Ban on SIM Farms: Government Response to Consultation

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): I am today publishing a response to the consultation on the banning of SIM farms in the UK and introducing legislation that would criminalise the possession and supply of SIM farms used for fraud.

In May 2023, we consulted on a potential ban on SIM farms, defined as devices that can make calls and texts and hold more than four SIM cards at one time. We are grateful to those who took time to respond to the consultation.

Responses to the consultation support the Government's approach to addressing the issue of SIM farm equipment being used to perpetrate fraud. Respondents agreed that the ban will raise the barrier to entry for those engaging in illegal activities, making it more difficult for them to obtain and exploit SIM farms for fraud.

This consultation has informed legislation that we have brought forward in the Criminal Justice Bill, creating a new criminal offence to supply or possess a SIM farm, subject to certain exemptions for legitimate use and where adequate due diligence has been undertaken. The offence will carry a penalty of an unlimited fine.

The provisions include measures to extend the offence to any other telecommunications device or other article where there is a significant risk of it being used for fraud.

This new offence will give police additional tools to disrupt criminals and make it more difficult to access and abuse SIM farms and similar technologies for fraud.

The response (CP 978) has been laid before the House and is available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS70]

Petitions

Monday 27 November 2023

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Road closures in South Northamptonshire

The petition of residents of South Northamptonshire,

Declares that there have been recent, uncoordinated road closures at very short notice with poor signage on the M1 at J15, J15A, A508, A5, A43, B4525, A422 and many other B and C roads; notes that residents have contributed to many planning consultations in recent years on developments such as HS2, SEGRO Logistics Park Northampton and the unwelcome warehousing proposals on the AL sites; further declares that South Northamptonshire has taken an excessive amount of new development where local interests have been overlooked, in favour of the national interest.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to require better coordination between stakeholders, including developers, National Highways and local councils, when closing roads in order to relieve local residents of their misery.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002878]

OBSERVATIONS

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Development proposals at 21 High Trees Avenue

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the development proposal at 21 High Trees Avenue, Bournemouth under planning application 7-2022-212-10 B did not properly consider residential concerns; notes that the development's height, impact on surface water, appearance, impact on parking and interference with residents was not properly considered during initial planning and at the Planning Inspectorate appeal by the developer.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and continue to take into account these concerns if a challenge to the Planning Inspectorate is made within the 6-week window now that the developer's appeal has been rejected.—[*Presented by Mr Tobias Ellwood, Official Report, 25 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 938.*]

[P002868]

Observations from the Minister for Housing (Lee Rowley):

The planning inspector's appeal decision on behalf of the Secretary of State was issued on 6 October 2023, including reasons for the decision. The inspector dismissed the appeal and refused planning permission.

The appeal decision and reasons are available on the Planning Inspectorate's website at: Reference: APP/V1260/W/23/3315861 (planninginspectorate.gov.uk).

The decision can only be challenged by application to the High Court based on an error of law. Should such a challenge occur, the Government will consider the legal basis for the challenge before deciding how to defend the decision in the High Court.

Southbourne Crossroads Car Park

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the proposed development of Southbourne Crossroads Car Park in Bournemouth into a series of residential properties would have a detrimental impact on the local community and Bournemouth's capacity to accommodate increasing tourist numbers; notes that the proposed development was objected to at a local planning level under planning application 7-2021-28119 & 7-2022-28119A and then passed a review from the Planning Inspectorate under the appeals S78/2022/7409 & NON/2022/7408A.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take into account the concerns of the large volume of petitioners from Bournemouth East who object to the development of Southbourne Crossroads Car Park and take immediate action to intervene in reviewing the Planning Inspectorates decision to overturn the Local Planning Authority's original decision.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Mr Tobias Ellwood, Official Report, 26 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 992.*]

[P002869]

Observations from the Minister for Housing (Lee Rowley):

The planning inspector's appeal decision on behalf of the Secretary of State was issued on 3 March 2023, including reasons for the decision. Having considered all the evidence, including representations from the local community, the inspector allowed the appeal and granted planning permission.

The appeal decisions and reasons are available on the Planning Inspectorate's website at: Reference: APP/V1260/W/22/3302066 (planninginspectorate.gov.uk).

Unless they are quashed by the High Court, which these decisions have not been, appeal decisions are the final decision on planning applications. There is no further review or appeal mechanism available.

The Kytes Regeneration Project

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the protection to house veterans with disabilities at Kytes Drive has been removed; further that a legally binding covenant should be included into the Kytes Regeneration Project to ensure that new homes to be built will continue to only house veterans, those with disability and the elderly, and their families.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Anchor Hanover to engage with the council and include a legally binding agreement ensuring that Kytes Estate includes purpose-built and well-maintained rented accommodation to house people over the age of 55, those with disabilities, and veterans, and their families.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Dean Russell, Official Report, 23 October 2023; Vol. 738, c. 698.*]

[P002865]

Observations from the Minister for Housing (Lee Rowley):

The Government recognise how crucial supported housing is to those who need it, including people with disabilities.

To ensure that those who have put their life on the line for their country are not disadvantaged in accessing social housing, we changed the law so that those serving in the armed forces, as well as former service personnel with urgent housing needs, are always given “additional preference” for social housing.

More broadly, the national planning policy framework makes clear that local authorities should assess the size, type and tenure of housing needed for different groups in the community and reflect this in planning policies.

It is for housing associations, as independent private sector organisations, to make their own commercial decisions. They must, however, comply with the standards set by the independent regulator of social housing. This includes the tenant involvement and empowerment standard, which requires landlords to provide their tenants with the opportunity to influence and be involved in decisions that affect them.

Ministerial Correction

Monday 27 November 2023

DEFENCE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Defence Questions on 20 November 2023.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I believe that the ability to make virgin steel is crucial to the UK's defence capabilities. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree?

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She has been a long-running champion of the steel sector and its importance to her constituents. Of course, we want a smooth transition between blast furnace and electronic arc steel making technology. Steel remains incredibly important to the defence sector.

Take the Type 26: almost 50% of that is British steel. That is 1,400 tonnes per ship. That underlines why it is so important that, in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's, we continue to support the steel sector.

[Official Report, 20 November 2023, Vol. 741, c. 24.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Defence Procurement, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge):

An error has been identified in the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft).

The correct answer should have been:

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She has been a long-running champion of the steel sector and its importance to her constituents. Of course, we want a smooth transition between blast furnace and electronic arc steel making technology. Steel remains incredibly important to the defence sector. Take the Type 26: almost 50% **by value** of that is British steel. That is 1,400 tonnes per ship. That underlines why it is so important that, in constituencies such as my hon. Friend's, we continue to support the steel sector.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 27 November 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	533	HOME DEPARTMENT—continued	
Asylum Seeker Accommodation	540	Rwanda Relocation Scheme: Supreme Court	
Defending Democracy Taskforce	538	Judgment	543
Illegal Migration	541	Students: Temporary Visas for Dependents	539
Illegal Migration: Small Boats	535	Topical Questions	546
Organised Crime	533	Violence against Women and Girls.....	542
Police Funding Formula	545		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 27 November 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	35WS	HOME DEPARTMENT—continued	
Advanced Manufacturing Plan and		UEFA Men's European Championship: Licensing	
UK Battery Strategy	35WS	Hours.....	37WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	37WS		
Ban on SIM Farms: Government Response		TREASURY	37WS
to Consultation	38WS	North East Investment Zone.....	37WS

PETITIONS

Monday 27 November 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND		PRESENTED PETITION	1P
COMMUNITIES	1P	Road closures in South Northamptonshire	1P
Development proposals at 21 High Trees Avenue...	1P		
Southbourne Crossroads Car Park.....	2P		
The Kytes Regeneration Project	2P		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Monday 27 November 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>
DEFENCE	5MC
Topical Questions	5MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Monday 4 December 2023**

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CONTENTS

Monday 27 November 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 533] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for the Home Department

Israel and Hamas: Humanitarian Pause [Col. 553]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Mitchell)

Leasehold and Freehold Reform [Col. 572]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Ways and Means (Autumn Statement Resolutions [Col. 573]
Debate resumed
Resolutions agreed to

Finance [Col. 669]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Post Office Services: Edinburgh West [Col. 671]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Legislation on Dangerous Dogs [Col. 189WH]
E-petition debate

Written Statements [Col. 35WS]

Petitions [Col. 1P]
Observations

Ministerial Correction [Col. 5MC]
