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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 7 December 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

The Clerk at the Table having informed the House of the unavoidable absence, through illness, of the Speaker from the sittings of the House this week, the Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Food Waste

1. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help reduce food waste. [900502]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): The UK is an international leader in tackling food waste, which has fallen by 17% since 2007 or the equivalent of 26 kg per person. This year, over £2 million will go to our food waste prevention programme and we have a groundbreaking industry initiative, helping to redistribute more food than ever before.

Andrew Selous: As I understand it, a third of all food is wasted, which contributes around 9% of greenhouse emissions and costs our economy about £20 billion a year. Will the Secretary of State consider introducing policies that reduce food waste across the supply chain, such as improved food waste reporting from industry, so that we can target, measure and act on food waste for the sake not only of our economy, but our planet?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. Some 60% of food waste is wasted in the home, but the Courtauld commitment includes a groundbreaking voluntary agreement with industry that has doubled the amount of food redistributed in the last two years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the Secretary of State rightly says, if we are going to reduce food waste, that starts with everybody participating, including people at home and retail businesses. In Strangford, Asda, Tesco and Lidl all redistribute food waste to local community groups before it goes bad and becomes unpalatable. Does the Secretary of State welcome that? It underlines the fact that everyone needs to participate in the reduction of food waste, starting with the supermarkets, people in their houses and the Government?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right that the issue applies to all parties, which is why we fund Love Food Hate Waste and the Food Waste Action Week campaigns to raise awareness. Food waste is down 17% since 2007 and we have doubled the amount of food redistributed since 2019, so significant progress has been made, but there is more to do and those information campaigns play a key role in getting that message across.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Question 2 is in the name of Bob Blackman, but I see that he is not present. Will the Minister answer Question 7, which is grouped with it?

Fly-tipping

7. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle fly-tipping. [900508]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): The Government's fly-tipping grants are helping councils across the country put a stop to fly-tipping at hotspots, by spending £1.2 million on the issue and a further £1 million will be awarded in the spring. In July, we increased the maximum penalty councils can issue from £400 to £1,000. From April, all income from those penalties will be reinvested in enforcement and cleaning up fly-tipping in local areas.

Craig Tracey: I welcome the Minister to his place. Fly-tipping is a huge problem across North Warwickshire and Bedworth, with thousands of incidents every year, particularly in rural areas where the farming community is left to bear the brunt of many of the costs. We are lucky to have a dedicated rural crime team, who do amazing work helping to tackle the issue, but will the Minister give an update on the progress of the national rural crime unit in tackling the scourge on our communities?

Robbie Moore: I am very happy to pay tribute to the dedicated Warwickshire rural crime team, which does fantastic work in that area, and especially to Carol Cotterill, who leads on it. The Government are funding a new fly-tipping post in the national rural crime unit to optimise the role that the police can take in tackling fly-tipping in rural areas. We have also confirmed reforms to waste carrier registration, the introduction of digital waste tracking, and the abolition of DIY local waste tips.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that a real problem with fly-tipping is skips? Unscrupulous and dodgy skip companies allow their skips to be filled and then, mysteriously, those skips do not end up in a legitimate place for waste. Will he look at the new technology we could have? I believe that every skip should have a gizmo that tracks where it came from and where it is going. Using technology in that way would solve problems, and I know that he would get a lot of cross-party support for it.

Robbie Moore: I will, of course, always welcome innovation when it comes to dealing with waste crime. The Government are already taking action on that by awarding £1.2 million to help more than 30 councils to purchase equipment specifically to tackle fly-tipping.

Our digital waste tracking system will make it easier for authorities to identify waste that does not reach the next stage. I will absolutely be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman if he has any ideas on this issue so that we can take them forward.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Angus is the garden of Scotland—the Minister is familiar with Angus, as we all know—but we also have a fly-tipping blight that is deeply concerning for our communities. Farmers do their best to clear up those messes, but it is not just commercial fly-tippers taking an opportunity to make a fast buck; other people are avoiding proper refuse centres. Can the Minister assure the House that £1.2 million is enough? The Barnettised share of that for Scotland does not amount to very much. Will he redouble those efforts? Let us get a grip on this blight.

Robbie Moore: I do know Angus very well. Like me, the hon. Gentleman will be incredibly frustrated when he sees fly-tipping taking place in our beautiful countryside. When it comes to rural crime, we are working with likes of the National Farmers Union, our counterparts in Scotland and others to share good practice. As I have said, we have already funded a post within the national crime unit to explore how the police's role in tackling fly-tipping can be optimised. That will specifically help rural areas such as Angus.

Air Pollution

3. **Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to reduce levels of PM_{2.5} air pollution. [900504]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): PM_{2.5} is the most harmful pollutant for human health. Our action to date on transport, industrial and domestic sources has seen PM_{2.5} fall by 10% since 2010. This year, we went further by setting new targets to drive down PM_{2.5} concentrates, and the Government will deliver on our air quality and net zero goals by supporting businesses to innovate.

Afzal Khan: Manchester has some of the highest air pollution levels in the country, with thousands of children being seen in A&E this year alone because of asthma and the impact of air pollution. I recently met children from St Margaret's CofE Primary School to hear about how they are asthma-friendly and doing everything they can to reduce air pollution at their school so that all pupils are safe and healthy. Labour's proposal for a clean air Act would establish a legal right for everyone to breathe clean air, abiding by World Health Organisation clean air guidelines. Why will the Government not commit to that?

Robbie Moore: It seems to me that no action is being taken at the moment by the Labour Mayor of Manchester. The Government take air pollution incredibly seriously, which is why we have awarded £53 million to English local authorities since 2010 to support the delivery of more than 500 local projects specifically to tackle air pollution. We have also put an additional £10.7 million—granted to 44 local authorities in 2023 alone—into tackling the negative implications of air quality specifically.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Research shows that PM_{2.5} can be 3% to 8% higher in electric versions of heavier applications, such as buses and trucks, than in their internal combustion engine equivalents. Does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to get clean air and cut down PM_{2.5}, we need an eclectic future that embraces all technology and our great innovators, not just battery-electric?

Robbie Moore: As I have said, I will always welcome innovation when it comes to improving air quality, not only in transport but in the implications of industry and commercial operators. It is clear that, through the Environment Act 2021, the Government introduced the legally binding targets to reduce PM_{2.5}. We have a set goal to reduce exposure to PM_{2.5} by 35% by 2040.

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

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): From Bournemouth to Bolton, Hull to Newcastle-under-Lyme, people are crying out for action to clean our air, but the air quality targets the Minister just mentioned, which were eventually set under the much-delayed Environment Act, are at twice the World Health Organisation limit and do not have to be met until 2040. So does he accept the judgment of his Government's own Office for Environmental Protection that, on clean air, Tory Ministers are unambitious and lacking the urgency we need?

Robbie Moore: This Government, through our landmark Environment Act, have set key targets that we will be delivering on—many Opposition Members did not support all of its measures. As for supporting local authorities, as I have said, we are investing £53 million to support them in delivering more than 500 projects to specifically tackle air pollution and air quality issues.

Food Security

4. **Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on helping to ensure food security. [900505]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): Strengthening food security by supporting world-class farmers and food producers is a top priority for this Government. We produce 60% of the food we consume, and food is one of the UK's 13 critical national infrastructure sectors, which we regularly discuss with Cabinet colleagues.

Rachel Hopkins: I recently visited Tom, a farmer from my constituency, at the family farm in Pepperstock, where we spoke about the importance of UK food sustainability—growing, harvesting and eating domestic produce. That is at risk without a well-functioning seasonal worker scheme. The National Farmers Union recommends improving the current scheme by securing it for five years, with annual reviews, and by increasing the visa period to nine months, to cover longer harvests. Does the Secretary of State agree that those potential reforms could support greater food security in the UK and mean less reliance on food imports?

Steve Barclay: I agree with the hon. Lady on the importance of food productivity and the sustainability of our farming sector, which is why we held the “UK Farm to Fork” summit in May, chaired by the Prime Minister, where we discussed food security with representatives. It is also why just in this past week we announced £45 million to support our farming and rural sector in getting innovation to farms and to help with costs, such as for solar, as part of that investment.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new role and, in particular, the experience of negotiating with the European Union that he brings to it, which will become more and more important in the months ahead. I welcome his remarks about supporting the farming industry, but I ask him not to forget the seafood industry and its importance in providing food security—I am sure he will not. As he also knows, he has an open invite, as the new Environment Secretary, to visit my constituency, which is a major fishing constituency in the UK. While he is there, if not before, through a virtual meeting, will he meet me and members of the seafood industry to discuss the way forward, because as much as we welcome the measures announced earlier this week to tackle abuse of legal migration, there are concerns as we transition away from freedom of movement?

Steve Barclay: Obviously, I am happy to give a commitment to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those important issues. He will be interested to know that just this week I had a series of meetings with fishing leaders to discuss some of the issues, including not only the 2026 negotiation, but the interaction with other areas of Government, not least in respect of the offshore wind sector and the pressure on space. We also discussed the work going on in our marine protection zones and how that interacts with the fishing industry, which I am absolutely committed to supporting.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I, too, welcome the new Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), and the new Secretary of State—I believe he is the fifth during my time in the shadow Environment team. The fish our fishers catch is vital to our food security, but the recent antics of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, which is, in the name of safety, implementing new medical rules, are leaving many inshore fishers at their wits' end. Can it really be right that a fisherman in the prime of his working life risks losing his livelihood because he was brave enough a few months ago to admit to a doctor that he felt anxious? I do not think it is, so will the Secretary of State corner his colleague the Transport Secretary in order to get him to do better than a temporary pause on this and to look urgently at exemptions for smaller boats, as other countries have sensibly done?

Steve Barclay: It is great to have Cambridgeshire so well represented on these important issues of fishing and farming. The shadow Minister raises an important point, because there have been concerns in the fishing sector. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries and I have been in touch with Department for Transport

colleagues on this issue. There have been amendments to the regulations as a result of those discussions, which are ongoing. However, we should not alarm people either, and the way that the shadow Minister characterised this—suggesting that someone went to their GP and raised an issue, and that prevented them from following their livelihood—is not what the regulations do. I recognise that there have been concerns in the sector. We are looking at them closely and following them up, but the situation is not as he characterised it. That would cause undue harm to those in the fishing sector.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Post-Brexit attempts to recruit domestic workers into agricultural jobs have not managed to fill existing vacancies, leaving firms unable to produce at pre-Brexit levels. New Government rules on migration now put the minimum income requirements for immigrant workers far higher than the level currently earned by an agricultural worker in the UK. In that context, what assessment is he and his Department making of the impact that his Government's draconian immigration policies will have on the security of domestic food production and on the cost and availability of food for consumers as they continue to battle the cost of living crisis to put food on their tables?

Steve Barclay: Of course we will work with colleagues in the fishing industry to discuss the impacts of the Home Office announcement—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps the hon. Member would like to hear the answer, having asked the question. That is part of the discussions that we will have. It is worth reminding the House that, for farming, the seasonal agricultural workers scheme is separate and is not part of the announcement from Home Office colleagues this week. However, there will be questions from the fishing industry, and we stand ready to work with it on those.

Red Tractor Assurance Scheme

5. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Whether he has had recent discussions with representatives of supermarkets on their proposed changes to the Red Tractor scheme. [900506]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): The Red Tractor assurance scheme is independent and its relationship with food retailers is a commercial matter for it. Separately, the Government will launch a review of the fresh produce sector to understand issues relating to fairness in the supply chain. It is important that consumers know about the food they buy.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. As he will be aware, although farmers in this country want to comply, they are a bit concerned that they may be disadvantaged compared with foreign producers who do not work to the same standards. What assurance can he give to British farmers that he will do everything he can to make sure that supermarkets do not disadvantage them?

Steve Barclay: I can give my hon. Friend a very strong assurance on that front. Supporting British farmers is my No. 1 priority. Indeed, with the Minister for Food,

Farming and Fisheries in the Department, we have someone who has a lifetime's experience of working as a farmer. We should be proud of the Red Tractor scheme, which is known around the world for being a high-quality mark of British produce. I recognise, however, that concerns have been raised and we will launch a review soon into fairness in the horticulture supply chain, but if necessary, I will not hesitate to use the powers in the relevant Act to introduce legislation to tackle contractual unfairness, wherever that exists.

Climate Change: Impact on Food Prices

6. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero on the impact of climate change on food prices. [900507]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): Food prices depend on a range of factors, which have recently included Russia's war in Ukraine and the subsequent energy price rises. Supporting our world-class farmers and food producers and driving down inflation are top priorities for the Government.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit reports that energy costs and climate change have pushed up food bills by an average of £605 over the past two years, with climate change driving 60% of that increase. We already import £8 billion-worth of food from countries struggling with extreme weather. Obviously, we want to support those countries on an international level with climate adaptation. In terms of our food security here, will the Secretary of State review his predecessor's decision to secretly scrap the horticulture strategy, which could have helped domestic growers and made us more resilient to the impact of climate change on food security and food prices?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the impact of climate change on food prices in the future. That is exactly why the Government passed the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 to help to unlock innovation and strengthen food security by enabling our leading scientists to develop crops that will best resist climate change. It is why the Government published the third national adaptation programme as recently as July, and it is why we have our farming innovation programme—with £270 million of funding—which is focused on driving productivity and ensuring that there is sustainability in the environmental and farming sectors.

Food Prices

8. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of food prices. [900509]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): October's consumer prices index price inflation was 10.1%, down from 12.1% in September and the lowest figure since June 2022. Industry analysts expect food price inflation to continue to decrease, and the Government are providing an average of £3,300 per household to help with the cost of living this year and next.

Patrick Grady: The Minister, like the Secretary of State before him, forgot to mention one of the biggest drivers of food inflation in this country. I will give them a clue: it starts with "Br" and ends in "exit". The reality is that the UK is the only G7 country where food price inflation remains above 10%, and the average across OECD countries is 7.4%. If this Government are not going to follow the SNP's proposals for price controls on food, what are they going to do to finally get a grip on increasing food prices?

Mark Spencer: I think the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. If we compare prices in the European Union with prices here in the UK, we see that the price of a basket of goods here in the UK is substantially lower than it is for our friends in the European Union. If Brexit were the problem here, surely those prices would be higher in the UK than they are in the European Union. I think he is barking up the wrong tree.

British Food Producers

10. **Mr Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): What steps he is taking to support British food producers. [900511]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The Government are committed to supporting British food producers. We are investing £2.4 billion a year in England's farming sector, and we will also look to support more growers through the replacement of the fruit and vegetables aid scheme for England in 2026. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs also sponsors small and medium-sized enterprise masterclasses to signpost and support those businesses.

Mr Roberts: I thank the Minister for his answer. Having gone through a difficult time during covid, in which it had to reduce staffing numbers, the Oscar Mayer factory in my constituency has now taken on additional product lines and is looking to expand and create significant new employment opportunities. It uses traditional methods and fresh ingredients to make healthy and affordable meal options. I know it is watching these proceedings and would be delighted if the Minister confirmed that he will visit the factory in Flint to see the huge improvements it has made in changing the ready meal sector, which has historically been poorly regarded?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be surprised to know that I would be delighted to visit a food factory. I am also delighted to hear about the success of Oscar Mayer. North Wales has a strong food and drink footprint, represented by many large and small businesses. Should my diary allow, I would be delighted to visit. I will make sure that my colleagues in the Wales Office also know that they have an open invitation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Question 11 is in the name of Sir Edward Leigh, who is not in his place. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State answered the question, as the shadow Minister has indicated that he would like to ask a supplementary question.

Flooding: Management of Waterways

11. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to manage waterways to help reduce the risk of flooding. [900512]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): The Government are investing £5.2 billion in flood protection between 2021 and 2027. This builds on the previous six-year investment of £2.6 billion, showing the increased investment that the Government are making in flood protection.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful for your generosity, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are just grateful that at least some Conservative Members have turned up.

On 20 October over 500 homes in Chesterfield, like hundreds across the UK, were flooded, leading to the tragic death of Mrs Gilbert on Tapton Terrace. Less than a month later, with the impeccable timing that only this accident-prone Government are capable of, the National Audit Office announced that the Government had cut by 40% the number of homes that will be protected from floods by 2027. Will the Secretary of State at least promise the House that he will never again say to a flood victim that the Government are doing all they can?

Steve Barclay: I am sure the whole House extends our condolences on the sad loss of Mrs Gilbert. Our investment in flood asset maintenance is up by £220 million. As I said, the previous six-year investment was £2.6 billion. Between 2021 and 2027, we are now investing £5.2 billion. Yes, there have been pressures on the programme through inflation and covid, as the National Audit Office report shows, but what is not in doubt is the increased funding that this Government are putting into flood protection—the £5.2 billion indicates that—alongside the increased funding for flood maintenance.

Raptor Persecution

12. **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle raptor persecution. [900513]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): The Government take raptor persecution very seriously. It is a national wildlife crime and there are strong penalties in place for offences committed against birds of prey. In 2022, DEFRA more than doubled its funding for the national wildlife crime unit to £1.2 million over three years, in part to target crimes of raptor persecution.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the Minister for his response. There are many long-standing traditions that are worth preserving in our countryside, but raptor persecution is definitely not one of them. It is a vile practice and we need to do much more to protect our majestic birds of prey. Have the Minister and the Department considered whether introducing vicarious liability would act as a deterrent to rogue landowners who direct their gamekeepers to commit wildlife crime?

Robbie Moore: As I said, the Government take raptor persecution very seriously, and those found guilty of wildlife crimes should be subject to the full force of the law. DEFRA is working with the national bird of prey crime priority delivery group, which brings together the police, the Government, local authorities and stakeholders to make sure we are doing as much as we can to tackle this type of crime.

Topical Questions

T1. [900519] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): May I begin by thanking and paying tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), for her work as Secretary of State? Having represented for over 13 years a rural constituency that, with the Cambridgeshire fens, is well known for its farming and water management, I am delighted to be appointed as Secretary of State at DEFRA and to be working with a strong ministerial team, including the new Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore).

In the next few days I will be travelling to COP28 to continue the work that was put centre stage at Glasgow on ensuring that nature is at the heart of our approach to tackling climate change. My priority for the Department is to back British farming and fishing, champion rural communities and protect our environment for generations to come.

Dr Cameron: I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. My constituents are particularly keen that the UK has the best possible animal welfare standards internationally, and they wrote to ask the Secretary of State what progress is being made, particularly on livestock and equine welfare.

Steve Barclay: Animal welfare is an extremely important issue. That is why we introduced the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill in the King's Speech. We were only able to do that because of our exit from the European Union. It is right that we put in place a ban to stop the export of livestock and horses for slaughter. My hon. Friend will also be aware of the two private Members' Bills that are being taken forward to tackle the important issues of pet smuggling and pet theft, which I know are concerns to Members on both sides of the House.

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. He will have seen the BBC "Panorama" investigation that exposed how this Conservative Government have turned a blind eye to corruption and cover-ups at the heart of the water industry. Consumers are left facing higher water bills, while water bosses profit from pollution. Will the Secretary of State now back Labour's plan to let the regulator block any bonuses for water bosses who are responsible for the tidal wave of sewage pouring into our rivers?

Steve Barclay: We can go one better than that, in that we have already brought forward measures that allow the regulator, Ofwat, to take action, alongside tougher

penalties, now with unlimited fines. In addition, all storm overflows will be monitored 100% by the end of this year, and there will be a much tougher approach on regulation, as the House heard in the strong response to the debate earlier this week.

T2. [900520] **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): The Mayor of Greater Manchester's proposal for a 493 square mile clean air charging zone would have been a disaster for businesses in my constituency. Can my right hon. Friend provide an update on the Government's response to the current Greater Manchester clean air proposal?

Steve Barclay: I can try, but the task of finding clarity in the position of the Mayor of Greater Manchester in this regard is somewhat confusing. First he says he is in favour of tackling the issue of air quality—and, indeed, we have heard from Opposition Members how important that is—and then, when he has powers to take action, he seems to look to Westminster and expect us to act on his behalf. Of course I will follow up my hon. Friend's request and seek clarity from the Mayor, but the ability to do so has, to date, been rather limited.

T3. [900521] **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Why have the Secretary of State and this Conservative Government allowed water companies to increase my constituents' bills substantially and pay out millions in executive bonuses, while failing to regulate the industry's rampant pollution and the dumping of raw sewage in our waterways, in stark contrast to Labour's commitment to hold those companies accountable?

Steve Barclay: Let us look behind the rhetoric. Given that the Leader of the Opposition keeps telling us that he wants the Labour Government in Wales to be his blueprint, it is probably worth our taking a look at Labour's record in this respect. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman asked the question, but he does not seem to want to hear about Labour's record, which is not surprising. Under Labour in Wales, the average number of spills from storm overflows last year was 66% higher than the average in England. We have introduced unlimited fines and tougher regulation, and we have set strong targets in legislation. We can see what Labour in power would deliver—we can see it in Wales: a 66% increase in storm overflows.

T5. [900523] **Dr Neil Hudson** (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Can the Minister give me an update on the investigation by the Department and the UK Health Security Agency of the recently confirmed human case of influenza A(H1N2)v, which is similar to influenza viruses currently circulating in pigs in the UK? Does he agree that infectious diseases such as this with a zoonotic potential underline the importance of the Animal and Plant Health Agency to our national biosecurity and public health, and that we should definitely be investing in the long-term redevelopment of its headquarters in Weybridge?

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): Swine influenza is endemic in the UK pig population. It generally causes only mild illness, but the Health Security Agency's investigation, with support from DEFRA, is ongoing. We are committed to upholding the UK's high level of biosecurity, and work is under

way, with £200 million in the current spending review, to safeguard the long-term future of Weybridge as a centre for scientific excellence in tackling high-risk diseases such as this.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have not much time, so could we go a bit faster, with shorter questions and shorter answers?

T4. [900522] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What steps has the Department taken to deliver the measures proposed in the national food strategy to encourage the reformulation of food and drink products?

Steve Barclay: That is one of the issues that I look forward to dealing with in the weeks ahead, and I shall be happy to drop a note to the hon. Lady.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I apologise for not being here earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Fly-tipping is the No. 1 issue in my constituency. Will my hon. Friend join me in praising Conservative-run Harrow Council for introducing free waste collections and 24-hour notice of fly-tipping clear-ups, and indeed increasing the number of fines for fly-tipping from 60 per year—under Labour—to 600 last year?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): I commend the great work that Conservative-run Harrow Council is doing, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for bringing those points to our attention. The new fly-tipping league tables allow central and local government, and indeed members of the public, to identify councils that are taking a proactive approach to enforcement—instead of simply cleaning up after fly-tippers—at fly-tippers' expense.

T6. [900524] **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): A successful healthy and sustainable food system requires a number of factors, including a consumer base that can afford it. Recent surveys show that 25% of people have removed healthy and organic food from their diet to save money. How does the Secretary of State plan to cultivate a consumer base that will enable people to buy good, healthy food?

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has set out a whole range of methods to support consumers with the cost of living—*[Interruption.]* Just as the hon. Lady raises her hands on that, it is also worth remembering that, under the Barnett consequential, Scotland receives more per head than those consumers in England. So those in Scotland are better able to meet those cost-of-living pressures—*[Interruption.]* SNP Members do not seem to like the facts, but it is a fact that under Barnett consequential the funding in Scotland is higher per head than the funding in England, which allows consumers to meet those cost of living pressures and to make those choices, should they so wish.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Over the past six weeks, the Suffolk and Norfolk coast has taken a real battering. Homes have tragically been lost to the sea,

not least in Pakefield in my constituency. Will my right hon. Friend review the support provided to such households and businesses, to ensure that they receive parity of support with those impacted by pluvial and fluvial flooding?

Steve Barclay: As a fellow east of England MP, I know what a fantastic champion my hon. Friend is for his constituents and how rigorously he will ensure that those points are made. He, as an experienced parliamentarian, will also know that many of those fiscal issues are for colleagues within the Treasury, but I am very happy to have discussions with him and to make representations where required.

T7. [900525] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Oxford was proud when Port Meadow was given bathing water status, yet just last week the water quality was again rated poor. With the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can hold Thames Water to account for its continual failure over dumping raw sewage in Oxfordshire?

Robbie Moore: I am happy, as the Minister responsible for water quality, to meet with the hon. Lady, but I will also say that, from the bathing water classifications we saw this week, 95.7% of bathing waters in England are rated good or excellent. That is up from 2010, when just 76% across England were rated good. This Government are taking water quality seriously, and I will endeavour to make sure that we go even further.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That concludes questions to DEFRA Ministers. We all welcome the new DEFRA team.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Fraud and Economic Crime: Prosecutions

1. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure the effective prosecution of perpetrators of fraud and economic crime. [900542]

4. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help ensure effective prosecution of perpetrators of fraud and economic crime. [900548]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): The Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office play a critical role in bringing economic criminals to justice. Just yesterday, the SFO announced a new investigation into fraud at AOG Technics Ltd, an aircraft parts supplier. That is the third new investigation launched since Nick Ephgrave became director of the SFO.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Members of the Conservative party used the pandemic as an opportunity to make money for their friends and donors totalling £3.5 billion. When will they face justice?

The Solicitor General: I completely refute what the hon. Lady has said. I was looking forward to her question, but I was disappointed with the tone and

substance of it. It is right to say that this Government are taking economic crime seriously, and fraud as well. I hope she has seen the new fraud strategy and, importantly, the report commissioned from Jonathan Fisher KC and his review on disclosure, which is due out next summer.

Alex Cunningham: The Government's fraud strategy in May was billed as a comprehensive plan to tackle fraud against the public and business, so can the Attorney General explain why it contains no details of the number of offences suffered by business, no estimates of the losses that result, no targets in relation to business, no measures specific to business and not a single mention of the two biggest types of business fraud: procurement and payroll?

The Solicitor General: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has seen the full strategy—that is good news. I repeat my point about Jonathan Fisher KC, who has some important work to do. The hon. Gentleman will understand the volumes of crime and the volumes of digital material in the Serious Fraud Office. Jonathan Fisher is looking at that and at disclosure, and that will help businesses, help individuals, help the country and help the SFO to get on with its job.

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

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Solicitor General will recall that back in 2022 the Justice Committee produced a report on fraud in the justice system and the steps needed to improve the way we tackle it. I welcome a number of the changes that have been made, including the appointment of Mr Fisher KC, but will the Solicitor General reflect that one of the areas of concern is the type of fraud that is significant, causes real loss to businesses and individuals, but falls below the level dealt with by the SFO? There is real concern about the capacity and expertise within police forces and the Crown Prosecution Service to tackle that level of fraud, which falls into the gap. What is the fraud strategy and, more broadly, what are the Government going to do to empower the police and prosecuting authorities to tackle that sort of fraud?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for his question. We take all his reports seriously, especially in this area. The CPS charges 76% of all fraud matters placed before it and has a conviction rate of more than 84%. I will commit to reflecting further on this matter.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Solicitor General will be aware that the Home Affairs Committee has launched a review of fraud. Last week, we heard fascinating testimony on romance fraud from the victim of the Netflix series "The Tinder Swindler". Remarkably in her case, she was treated as a perpetrator, investigated by the police and threatened with prosecution, even though she had been defrauded out of hundreds of thousands of pounds, and was led a merry dance by that chap, who is still doing what he did then. Is there not a case for bringing together Law Officers, Ministers, the police and the social media companies to ensure that we deal with the victims and the perpetrators accordingly?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend always raises serious points and brings to bear his expertise from the Home Affairs Committee. There is a case for cross-Government working. In my role as a Law Officer I work across all Departments, including the Home Office, and I look forward to continuing to do so.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Greensill Capital is subject to criminal investigation in the UK, Switzerland and Germany. In Duncan Mavin's book "A Pyramid of Lies," he subtitles the saga

"The Prime Minister, the Banker and the Billion-Pound Scandal".

Amazingly, the company was not regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Will the Attorney General please look into this massive loophole? The scandal could have been stopped if the FCA had been able to step in earlier.

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman will understand that the Attorney General and I superintend both the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office, but that does not mean that we direct how they conduct investigations, and nor should we. It is right and proper that both organisations conduct their matters independently of Government, and that will continue.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), what guidelines are given not only to the police but to the Crown Prosecution Service about the level at which fraud will be investigated? As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on personal banking and fairer financial services, I have referred a number of cases that have come to me to the police and to the CPS, and they say that they do not have the resources to investigate them. Could my hon. and learned Friend update the House on the position?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is diligent in these matters, and he raises an issue that affects us all as constituency MPs, as we have all had cases brought to us that need to be investigated. I work very closely with both the police and the Home Office, and I will continue to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): In January 2022, the then Chancellor said that, clearly, criminals have sought to exploit our covid support schemes, and

"We're going to do everything we can to get that money back and go after those who took advantage of the pandemic."

What proportion of that money has been recovered so far? How many of those who took advantage have been sent to jail?

The Solicitor General: First, I warmly welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place or, rather, back to his place, as I understand that this is his third outing in the shadow ministerial team. It is pleasing to see his predecessor, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), whose name is on the Order Paper. We look forward to his question.

The shadow Minister will be interested to know that I recently visited the Insolvency Service, which is conducting investigations into the bounce back loan scheme and the like. We must remember that the covid lending schemes delivered just under £80 billion of finance in almost

record time. It was called for from across the House and should be supported, but he is right that those who have committed fraud should be investigated.

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

2. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Unduly Lenient Sentence scheme. [900546]

The Solicitor General: In 2022, my office received 819 requests to review unduly lenient sentences. Of those, 139 were referred to the Court of Appeal, and the sentence was increased in 68% of cases.

Kevin Foster: I welcome much of the work being done. As the Solicitor General will be aware, a serving Royal Navy sailor was the subject of a violent attack in Torquay when he attempted to stop a group of yobs stamping a bird to death, but the unduly lenient community sentences and small fines handed down did not reflect the gravity of the offence or provide any deterrent. What steps will the Government take to review the unduly lenient sentence scheme to cover cases such as that?

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I know he has had a long-standing interest in this subject since even before he was a Member of the House, and I am grateful to him for holding the Government to account. He knows that the ULS scheme—the unduly lenient sentence scheme—is reserved for the most serious matters. It is right to say that we keep the scheme under review. I cannot promise or guarantee to my hon. Friend any imminent changes to it, but I am very grateful to him for raising that important case.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Could the Solicitor General make it clearer what the scheme is about and spread the message more broadly? I regularly write to him to say that a sentence has been too lenient. I recently wrote to him about Bernie Ecclestone, who I thought should have been severely punished for his behaviour. I have also sometimes written to the Solicitor General and his predecessors about too severe sentences, often involving women who have not conducted any violent crime but get long sentences. Can we have a balance, please?

The Solicitor General: Well, it is a Thursday, and I think we have heard a call for a Backbench Business debate or, indeed, for an Adjournment debate, and I would warmly welcome that. There have been such debates on the unduly lenient sentence scheme. It is not a mystery—there are further details online—but I would seriously welcome a further debate to air these matters, because they are important. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the balance between, on the one hand, unduly lenient sentences, and on the other hand, manifestly excessive sentences is important, and I look forward to his application for a debate.

Hamas and Israel: Breaches of International Law

3. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If she will hold discussions with Cabinet colleagues on consulting the International Criminal Court on potential breaches of international law in the conflict between Hamas and Israel. [900547]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): I know that the hon. Lady cares deeply about the region. She and I—and, indeed, you, Madam Deputy Speaker—visited the region together some years ago, and I know that at the current time all of us will be thinking about the places we visited and the people we met. In answer to her question, the ICC started an investigation into the situation in Palestine in March 2021.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the Attorney General for her response. In the light of the brutality and sexual violence perpetrated against Israeli civilians by the terrorists of Hamas, and the scale of the indiscriminate bombing of tens of thousands of Palestinians, including children, in Gaza, how is she urging the UK Government to advocate for the end of the killing to ensure that the International Criminal Court can gather the most detailed evidence to weigh the actions of all parties against international law at the earliest opportunity?

The Attorney General: The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and, indeed, the whole of the UK Government have consistently urged that international humanitarian law must be followed in this case. The ICC prosecutor, who is a British-born barrister—Karim Khan, with whom I have had a number of extremely helpful meetings over the course of my time as Attorney General—has said that the investigation is

“ongoing and extends to the escalation of hostilities and violence since the attacks that took place on 7 October”.

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

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Article 86 of the Rome statute says that, in relation to the work of the International Criminal Court, state parties shall “cooperate fully with the Court in its investigation and prosecution of crimes within the jurisdiction of the Court.”

Given that in 2022 the UK referred Russia to the ICC, can we assume that the UK will comply with any request from the ICC for footage from the reconnaissance flights operating over Gaza? If not, what would be the legal basis for refusing an ICC request?

The Attorney General: As I said, the UK supports the ICC and its chief prosecutor Karim Khan. We do have surveillance flights operating in the region. The primary purpose of those is to help with the hostage situation. We will say once again that we very much hope that the hostages will be released immediately. It is absolutely the case that we will continue to urge all parties to continue to abide by international humanitarian law.

Rule of Law within Government

5. **Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab):** What recent steps has she taken with Cabinet colleagues to uphold the rule of law within Government. [900549]

6. **Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab):** What recent steps has she taken with Cabinet colleagues to uphold the rule of law within Government [900550]

The Attorney General (Victoria Prentis): As I emphasised to the House of Lords Constitution Committee in June, the rule of law is fundamental to our constitution, and it is the duty of the Law Officers to uphold it.

Jeff Smith: I will not ask the Attorney General to comment on specific legal advice that she has given to colleagues—I know she cannot do that—but, as a general point of principle, does she agree that the inclusion of a notwithstanding clause in legislation cannot magic away the international laws to which it refers, especially if an individual claimant can still assert their rights under those international laws?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman knows very well, I am unable to do away with client confidentiality and give him the specifics of any legal advice that I may or may not have given. I take very seriously my obligations to encourage the Government to act in a lawful manner and to ensure that the Government are acting in a lawful manner, both on the domestic front and on the international front.

Andy Slaughter: While it is a pleasure to see my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) back in his rightful place on the Front Bench, I wonder how long the Attorney General will feel able to remain in hers. How comfortable is she with the draft Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill, which seeks to oust the jurisdiction of our highest courts, denies our country’s international treaty obligations and treats our constitution and the rule of law with contempt? She has rightly said that her first duty is

“as an officer of the court”,

and she has called for a “respectful relationship” between the Executive and the courts. Is that why her name does not appear on the face of the Bill?

The Attorney General: May I start by thanking the former shadow Solicitor General for his great work while in that post and in particular for his championing of the pro bono movement, which I know he has always taken extremely seriously? It has been and remains a pleasure to do business with him. He knows perfectly well—better than most—that I cannot give from the Dispatch Box the details of legal advice that I have been giving to the Government, or of whether or not I have been giving such advice. That remains the case. I remain very comfortable in my role, and I hope that I will remain in this role to give the Government legal advice for a long time to come.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I join colleagues on both sides of the House in welcoming the new shadow Solicitor General, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), to his place. I am delighted to see his predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), still contributing to our debates. It is a pleasure and a blessing to work with both of them.

As the previous questions illustrate, there is an intense level of public interest both inside and outside the House about the legal implications of the new Rwanda Bill. While I appreciate that there is a doctrine of client confidentiality, it is nevertheless right to ask the Attorney General formally if she will publish her full legal advice

on the Bill, as happened with the Brexit withdrawal agreement, or a summary of the legal position, as happened with the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill. In particular, will she set out the advice given to her colleagues across Government on whether the introduction and implementation of the Bill is compatible with their obligations under the ministerial code and the civil service code?

The Attorney General: The right hon. Lady understands, as I hope all of us in the Chamber do, the complications of the Law Officers convention, which means that I simply cannot go into the details of my advice here. On very rare occasions, either legal advice has been leaked or, more recently, I am glad to say, a summary of the Government's legal position, which may or may not include the Attorney General's advice, has been provided. The sort of circumstances in which we would envisage that to be appropriate would be if we were taking military action overseas, for example. It is not something that is done on a regular basis.

What I would say to colleagues, because there has been a great deal of interest in the legal position surrounding the Bill, is that the use of a section 19(1)(b) statement is not unprecedented. In fact, I remember, as a much younger lawyer, when Tessa Jowell used such a statement for the Communications Act 2003. That Act went on to be tested in the Strasbourg Court and the Government were successful in that case, so I would not read too much into the use of a section 19(1)(b) statement. It is unusual, but not unprecedented.

Covid-19 related Fraud: Prosecutions

7. Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): What recent discussions she has had with the Serious Fraud Office on the prosecution of covid-19 related fraud. [900551]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): The Attorney General and I regularly meet with the SFO director; however, the vast majority of covid fraud cases do not fall within the SFO's remit, and investigations are handled by the most appropriate agency. Recently, as the hon. Gentleman will have heard, I visited the Insolvency Service and heard about its excellent work in relation to bounce bank loans.

Neale Hanvey: Given the statement by the former director of the Serious Fraud Office that red flags were ignored, and that Parliament's own spending watchdog estimates potential fraud of £16 billion, how much has been recovered to date and what further lessons have

been learned and applied to ensure that identification and prevention of fraud is embedded across all Government Departments, and why are the UK Government not recovering that fraud with the same zeal and determination that they have for impoverishing benefit claimants who have had overpayments through no fault of their own?

The Solicitor General: I entirely refute and disagree with the hon. Gentleman's final comment, but he will be pleased to know that the new director of the SFO has set off apace. He has launched new investigations. There is a new energy and a new rigour within the SFO, but I repeat that it is not just the SFO that conducts such investigations; the Insolvency Service is also involved, and is also carrying out some excellent work.

Small Boat Crossings: Prosecution Rates

8. Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What steps she is taking to increase prosecution rates for small boat gangs and other people traffickers. [900553]

The Solicitor General (Michael Tomlinson): Earlier this year, the Attorney General and I visited Western Jet Foil and the joint control room in Dover to discuss the Illegal Migration Act 2023. The number of small boat crossings is down by a third this year, and we are seeing an increase in the number of prosecutions since the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022.

Chris Stephens: Yesterday the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill was laid before the House. It would disapply the Human Rights Act 1998 for those seeking sanctuary. That undermines the UK's international reputation and international law. The Home Secretary said yesterday at the Dispatch Box that the Attorney General made it clear that the Bill is in conformity with international law, so can he confirm that that advice was given, and how is it meant to impact small boat crossings and prosecutions?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman has kindly been present throughout question time, so he will know that I cannot confirm or deny whether advice was even sought, let alone given, let alone its content. His question is about small boat crossings, which Government Members are determined to stop. I was disappointed that he did not support our Nationality and Borders Act, which prosecuted the people traffickers. That is the substance of his question. I look forward to his reading the Bill in more detail and supporting it in due course.

Refurbishing Trains: Contracts

10.33 am

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on expediting the contract process for refurbishing existing UK trains.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Huw Merriman): I thank the hon. Member for his question, which I will answer on behalf of the Secretary of State. The Department works closely with rolling stock owners and train operators to understand when new and refurbished trains are likely to be required, and to ensure a regular flow of work for train manufacturing companies. Trains are major assets, with a lifetime of 35 to 40 years, so there will naturally be peaks and troughs in procurement cycles. The average age of the current fleet is 17 years.

The Department has overseen the procurement of more than 8,000 new vehicles for the Great British mainline railway since 2012. Some of those are still being produced, including Alstom trains for South Western and West Midlands trains. Passenger travel habits have changed over the past three years, and while numbers are showing signs of improvement, we are still seeing reduced passenger revenue on the railway. We are aware that Alstom is facing difficult trading conditions. It is consulting its unions and employees on possible job losses. While it must be a commercial decision for Alstom, the Government have been working with the company to explore options to enable it to continue manufacturing at its Derby site. Officials from my Department and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport have held regular meetings with senior management at Alstom. We have also convened a cross-Whitehall group to advise on ways to support continued production at Derby and how best to support those workers who could lose their jobs.

The fact remains that the market for passenger trains is competitive. The Department cannot guarantee orders for individual manufacturers. None the less, we expect substantial continued demand for new trains. Last month, LNER confirmed an order of 10 new tri-mode trains for the east coast main line, and on Monday, a tender for new trains for the TransPennine Express route was launched. Contract awards are also expected between late 2024 and early 2025 for major orders for Southeastern, Northern and Chiltern. In the meantime, the Government will continue to work with Alstom and other UK manufacturers to ensure a strong and sustainable future for the rail industry.

Grahame Morris: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this question on a matter of some urgency. I thank the Minister for his response, and I must impress upon him and the House that the Secretary of State must expedite the contract bidding process for updating existing UK trains to ensure the survival of the UK-based train manufacturing industry. Without immediate plans to allow companies to bid for new contracts, make no mistake, thousands of skilled jobs in the UK will go. The urgency stems from the crucial role of the Alstom factory in Derby. It is the UK's only end-to-end, design, build and test train manufacturing facility, making it integral to the UK's rail manufacturing industries.

Some 3,000 people currently work directly at Alstom, and 15,000 jobs in the supply chain rely on the factory's continued production. Nick Crossfield, Alstom's managing director, gave evidence to the Transport Committee yesterday, and he was absolutely clear that the Government need to decide now on how and where they want trains to be made in the future. If this Government do not expedite the bidding process, trains will not continue to be manufactured in the UK. They will start to be manufactured in North America, South America or south-east Asia.

Alstom's current and final contract for rolling stock is on the Elizabeth line and is due to expire in six weeks. That could mean an end to the rail manufacturing industry in the UK as we know it. Yesterday, I met Unite the union, of which I am a proud member, and rail workers from Alstom site in Derby, and they asked for our help in retaining their jobs. Also just yesterday, two of the supply chain companies that supply Alstom went into liquidation due to the uncertainty over future orders from the Alstom factory. Timing on this issue has never been more crucial.

Huw Merriman: May I again thank my friend the hon. Member for Easington for raising this important issue? This is a matter of grave concern. The site has been operating in Derby for many years. Indeed, I think he and I both went to that site when it was formerly owned by Bombardier as part of a Transport Committee delegation. That support is assured. I also make the point that I am meeting Unite the union next week. It has been in touch, and I will be pleased to work with it and everyone to see what more can be done to keep that plant open.

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

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I know that the Minister is a great advocate of the work of the Transport Committee, and I strongly urge him to look at the transcript of the evidence we received yesterday from not just Alstom but others in the rail industry. The fact is that the medium and long-term prospects for the sector are positive. What we are facing is a short-term lull. I impress on him the urgency of working with the rolling stock companies—ROSCOs—and others to try to bring forward some refurbishment contracts that Alstom and others can bid for to help smooth out these peaks and troughs in the sector.

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, for the work he does—that evidence session was particularly pertinent for highlighting the matters he allows that Committee to raise. I can assure him that the Secretary of State wrote to rolling stock owners in September to encourage them to discuss with train operators and manufacturers opportunities to ease short-term challenges in the supply chain, such as refurbishments or major overhauls. We recognise the issue, and have asked others to do their best to deliver on that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I declare that I am a member of Unite the union, and met with trade union members yesterday. The urgency of this matter cannot be overstated—the clock is ticking, and those jobs will be consulted on in the very near future if

[*Rachael Maskell*]

contracts cannot be found. The Minister wrote in September, but what has he been doing over the past three months to bring forward contracts that will enable the plant to remain open?

Huw Merriman: As I have mentioned, we have written to ask rolling stock owners what more action they can take. Just on Monday, I was up in Yorkshire for the announcement of an extra £3.9 billion in funding for the TransPennine route upgrade. That also starts the tendering process for new rolling stock—29 new trains, with an option for another 26—and as I mentioned, we are looking for the tendering process for Southeastern, Chiltern and Northern to go forward as well, so orders are being put into the pipeline for train manufacturers.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): From the generous time he has given me on this subject, my hon. Friend will know that overcrowding on the Chiltern line persists to a very serious degree, because the age of the rolling stock regularly leads to Chiltern having to run very short trains on the main line—trains that some people cannot even get on in the first place. As he looks at this important subject, will my hon. Friend do all he can to ensure that Chiltern can get trains refurbished and get new trains into the pipeline as soon as possible?

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend is a champion for the Chiltern line, and he does indeed bend my ear on that subject—he is right to do so, because that line is getting busier now, which is a positive. That tendering process will be brought into being next year: we want to see Chiltern trains, and that process should allow them to be delivered.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): We are not asking the Secretary of State to give one company special treatment over another—I should say that I am also a member of Unite the union—but I believe that the retention of British manufacturing capacity has to be regarded as strategically important for the United Kingdom. Will he allow us to go forward by granting all companies the opportunity to bid on new rail upgrade plans, such as Crossrail, Southeastern, and even the extensive Network North plans? Time is of the essence, and swift action from the Government can make a significant difference in securing the future of the UK rail manufacturing industry.

Huw Merriman: I can give the hon. Member that assurance. We will be bringing those contract tenders forward; we now have four train manufacturers, which is to be celebrated. We have CAF in south Wales, we have Hitachi up in the north-east, we have Alstom—of course—in Derby, and now we have Siemens in Goole. All those manufacturers are bidding, and the hon. Member is absolutely right that there must be a fair process for all, which will take place.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): It is not that long ago that we had the hated Pacer trains on the Furness line. We were very glad to see the back of those, but of course a new, shiny train is no good if it is not running. The Minister mentioned that if we are not seeing customer demand, that is going to hurt the industry, so

could he speak to what the Government are doing to improve customer service and get the level of train service back up to where my constituents hope it will be?

Huw Merriman: We are aware that performance needs to be a lot better than it is currently, not just from train manufacturers but from Network Rail. Indeed, I was due to meet with the train operators this morning to discuss that issue; obviously, I have had to move that meeting, but I am very happy to meet with my hon. Friend so that I can take his particular points into account. We need to do more.

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

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): The Alstom Litchurch Lane factory in Derby has been building trains for over a century, since the dawn of train travel. It has provided high-skilled jobs for the local community for generations and helps support other local companies that form part of its supply chain, and as Britain's biggest train-building plant, it plays a pivotal role in supporting the growth of the midlands and our country's manufacturing sector.

Following the Government's chaos and indecision over HS2 and the lack of a long-term strategy, hundreds of highly skilled jobs at the plant are at risk, with no confirmed workload beyond the first quarter of 2024, and contracts to build trains for HS2 pushed back until 2026, creating a gap in orders. This news will be deeply worrying for those affected and their families in the run-up to Christmas. It will also be extremely concerning for local businesses that rely on the factory and the wider rail sector, and for the people of Derby.

The workers at Alstom have only days to get a decision out of the Minister before their livelihoods are put at risk—time is up. They deserve to hear from the Minister how this has been allowed to happen, and what action the Government are taking to pursue a deal to secure the Derby plant and ensure that as many jobs are protected as possible. What urgent clarity can the Government provide Alstom on the short-term rolling stock pipeline, including possible refurbishments?

I am pleased that the Minister confirmed that he will be meeting representatives from Unite the union, and I hope that he will commit to working with them to safeguard jobs. When can the factory finally get certainty on HS2 orders, so that it can plan for the future and secure jobs? How many more rail manufacturing jobs across the country are at risk following the Government's recent decision on HS2?

Earlier this year, Derby was named the Government's home of Great British Railways. Just seven months on, the future of its landmark factory is in danger. At the heart of this is the chaos and indecision of the Conservative party. The Minister owes the people of Derby and the country an explanation of what he plans to do to stop the Prime Minister's HS2 fiasco leading to more job losses.

Huw Merriman: I will, if I may, deal with the matter of HS2 head-on. The shadow rail Minister made that same point, saying that this was somehow linked to HS2, and it has now been made from the Dispatch Box

today. The Secretary of State responded to the shadow rail Minister, so I shall put this on the record. With regard to HS2, he said:

“I can assure you this is not the case. Alstom is part of a contract with Hitachi to design, build and maintain HS2 trains for Phase One only. Phase One of HS2 between Birmingham and London will continue”.

That position has been reiterated by Alstom’s chief executive. I gently point out to the hon. Member for Wakefield (Simon Lightwood) that this has nothing to do with HS2; that has been established, and it is erroneous to claim otherwise.

The hon. Member also has to bear in mind that we now have four train manufacturers. We cannot just award a contract to one manufacturer; there has to be a fair tender process for all the jobs across all four plants. The Department for Transport has won a case brought by one of the other train manufacturers, demonstrating that our tendering process is fair.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My hon. Friend referred in his opening statement to a new order from TransPennine. He will be aware that there is severe overcrowding on the Cleethorpes-Manchester-Liverpool service, because the trains have been reduced from six carriages to three in recent months. Can he enlighten me as to when the new stock will be coming forward, as it will greatly please my constituents?

Huw Merriman: I hope my hon. Friend’s constituents will be comforted by the order, because it is not just an order for new TransPennine express trains but a complete upgrade of the TransPennine route. The UK Government are spending more money on the TransPennine upgrade than was spent on the Elizabeth line, and that will mean delivering a better service. I was with the managing director of TransPennine trains on Monday up in Yorkshire and we were discussing just that. We need to improve the service and the rolling stock.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Upgrades to our trains must include electrification, but electrification is at a standstill, with only 101 miles of track being electrified this year. East West Rail will not be electrified as standard, and dirty diesel trains are still going through Bath. Will the Minister commit to a long-term plan for electrification?

Huw Merriman: The Prime Minister’s Network North plan did just that—electrification for Hull, between Sheffield and Manchester, and between Sheffield and Leeds. They are vast projects, not small projects. With regard to East West Rail, that is the upgrade of an existing line, which has its bridge sizes all the way through from Winslow to Bletchley, so it is difficult to put electrification on to that part. Let me remind the hon. Lady that there has been more than 1,200 miles of electrification in the past 12 years compared with just over 60 miles in the 12 years before that. I think that is a pretty good record.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I, too, have met workers from the Alstom plant in Derby and, as a Unite member myself, representatives of Unite as well. It was pleasing to hear that workers, representatives and management are united in their desire to retain good, high-skilled manufacturing jobs and train production

there. I want to press the Minister again about recognising the importance of retaining the only end-to-end train production facilities in the UK during this short-term blip in production, so to speak. Does he agree that this investment in public transport is vital if we want to tackle the net zero challenges we face?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Lady is correct: that is vital. The challenge, and it is a good challenge, is that we now have four manufacturers, and we need to help them with international orders. That is why I sometimes go abroad with trade envoys from those companies to export around the globe. The average age of our rolling stock is down to just under 17 years—six years ago, it was 20 years—and as it gets fresher, there is a challenge with pipelines as well. However, we are bringing contracts forward so that we can fill the order book better.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As a Derbyshire Member of Parliament, I can tell the Minister that there is huge concern about the future of Alstom. I think it is perfectly reasonable to say that the Government have lacked strategic direction on rail. They have gone from one project to another, and in the last few years there has been no sense of an industrial strategy. When we have had these debates in the past, Ministers were always blaming the EU and saying we could not support British manufacturing because of the EU. We are now out of the EU, and it seems to me that countries such as Germany are much better at supporting their manufacturing. Can we have a real sense of urgency from the Minister and an indication that the Government are going to make sure, strategically, that these jobs are saved?

Huw Merriman: I assure the hon. Member that the Secretary of State in particular has been meeting Alstom, and our officials and our director general meet Alstom, including with representatives. I will be doing so on Tuesday week. We will do everything we can to assist, but this is a commercial matter for the operator. As I have mentioned, I have been to that plant with the Transport Committee and seen what it does for the workforce and for the supply chain. We will be doing everything we can to assist Alstom in keeping that plant open.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. With many of my constituents dependent on Government help and support for manufacturing industry, I can well understand union fears at the dithering and the effect on the workforce. It is necessary to refurbish a number of trains, so can the Minister outline how the Government will ensure that the much-needed refurbishment contracts can be organised to keep people in work, rather than paying out redundancy money to them only to rehire them six months later when things are arranged properly? That is the desire of every Member of this House.

Huw Merriman: Yes, indeed. As I have mentioned, we are bringing forward orders, and the Secretary of State has written to the companies that finance train manufacturing and refurbishment to ask what more they can do to bring forward that refurbishment. At the risk of repeating myself, the challenge we have, and it is a good challenge, is that we have four fine train manufacturers and we have rolling stock that is younger than it previously was. So the aim is to try to get orders out, which we are doing, but I reiterate that it is also

[Huw Merriman]

important that we help our train manufacturers export orders across the globe so that they can manufacture not just for home but for abroad, and keep those jobs going.

Cyber Interference: UK Democracy

10.53 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): With permission, I will make a statement about attempted cyber interference in British democracy. I know hon. and right hon. Members across this House will recognise the seriousness of this issue.

The Government have long highlighted the threat to the UK and our allies from malicious cyber activity conducted by the Russian intelligence services. I can confirm today that the Russian Federal Security Service, the FSB, is behind a sustained effort to interfere in our democratic processes. It has targeted Members of this House and the other place. It has been targeting civil servants, journalists and non-government organisations. It has been targeting high-profile individuals and entities with a clear intent, using information it obtains to meddle in British politics.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you and parliamentary security have been briefed on the details of that activity. We want to be as open as we can with the House and the British public. Our commitment to transparency stands in sharp contrast to the efforts of the KGB's successors to exert influence from the shadows. What can we confirm today? I want to stress five particular points of our assessments.

First, Centre 18, a unit within Russia's FSB, has been involved in a range of cyber-espionage operations targeting the UK.

Secondly, Star Blizzard, a cyber group that the National Cyber Security Centre assesses is almost certainly subordinate to Centre 18, is responsible for a range of malign activities targeting British parliamentarians from multiple parties.

Thirdly, using those means, the group has selectively leaked and amplified the release of sensitive information in service of Russia's goals of confrontation. In 2020, when he was Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) confirmed to the House that Russia had done that before the 2019 elections with documents related to UK-US trade. I can now confirm that we know Star Blizzard was involved in this operation.

Fourthly, these cyber actors use a combination of targeting, tailoring their operations in a far more sophisticated way than is usually the case with, for instance, commonplace cyber criminals. They typically engage in thorough research and preparation, including via social media and networking platforms. Having thus identified ways to engage a target, they create false accounts, impersonating contacts to appear legitimate, and create a believable approach, seeking to build a rapport before delivering a malicious link to either a document or website of interest. While they have targeted business and corporate emails, the group predominantly targets personal email addresses.

Finally, the targeting of this group is not limited to politicians, but includes public-facing figures and institutions of all types. We have seen impersonation and attempts to compromise email accounts across the public sector, universities, media, non-governmental organisations and wider civil society. Many of those individuals and

organisations play a vital role in our democracy. As an example, the group was responsible for the 2018 hack of the Institute for Statecraft, a UK think-tank whose work included initiatives to defend democracy against disinformation, and the more recent hack of its founder, whose account was compromised from 2021. In both cases, documents were subsequently leaked.

The Government's assessment is based on extensive analysis from the UK intelligence community and supported by a range of close international partners. Today, allies from the Five Eyes and the Euro-Atlantic region are joining us in illuminating the pervasive nature of this threat to our shared democratic values. I pay tribute to the dedicated public servants, in our own agencies and those of our partners, whose painstaking work has allowed us to expose the reality of the threat we face.

Taken together, the UK Government judge that these actions demonstrate a clear and persistent pattern of behaviour. Russia's attempted interference in political and democratic processes, through cyber or any other means, is unacceptable. I reassure the House that we have identified targeting of parliamentary colleagues and engaged with victims through both the National Cyber Security Centre and the parliamentary authorities.

The Government will continue to expose and respond to malign cyber activity, holding Russia accountable for its actions. To that end, the UK has designated two individuals under the UK's cyber sanctions regime, following a thorough investigation by the National Crime Agency into the hack of the Institute for Statecraft. In doing so we send a clear message that these actions have consequences. This morning, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has summoned the Russian ambassador to the Foreign Office to convey that message.

We have robust systems in place to protect against the threat from foreign malign influence. The Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), leads the defending democracy taskforce, which drives work to improve our resilience against these threats. Our National Cyber Security Centre, alongside Five Eyes partners, today published a technical advisory to provide guidance to organisations and individuals at risk of being targeted to help defend against such attacks. We will continue to defend ourselves from adversaries who seek to threaten the freedoms that underpin our democracy. It is and always will be an absolute priority to protect our democracy and elections.

A key component of increasing our resilience is supporting the National Cyber Security Centre and parliamentary authorities to deliver an enhanced cyber-security offer to right hon. and hon. Members, and to Members of the other place, that aims to better protect them against this insidious threat and support the resilience of our lively democratic society. We hope that this statement helps to raise awareness of the threat and allows those in public life, in this House and beyond, to recognise how they may be targeted by such operations.

Russia has a long-established track record of reckless, indiscriminate and destabilising malicious cyber-activity, with impacts felt all over the world. In recent years, the Government have, alongside allies, uncovered numerous instances of Russian intelligence targeting of critical national infrastructure, for example. We have worked in close co-ordination with our intelligence partners to expose sophisticated cyber-espionage tools aimed at

sensitive targets. The irony of Russia's abusing the freedoms that it denies its own people to interfere in our politics will not be lost on anyone.

Of course, our political processes and institutions have endured in spite of those attacks, but the cyber threat posed by the Russian intelligence services is real and serious. All right hon. and hon. Members should pay careful attention to it in the course of their work and their daily lives. Many in this House may not consider themselves a potential victim. I want to underline to the whole House that the targeting can be extremely convincing. We must all play our part in exercising good cyber practices, using appropriate caution and following the good guidance of the National Cyber Security Centre and others to mitigate the threat. That is how we defend ourselves and our precious democracy. I commend this statement to the House.

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

11.1 am

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

The news that the Russian intelligence service is behind an effort to target Members of this House and the other place, civil servants, journalists and NGOs is not just concerning; it is an attack—not only on individuals, but on British democracy, on both sides of this House, and on the public we represent. Labour, along with the whole House, condemns it in the strongest terms.

The news comes as we approach 2024, the year of elections not only in Britain, but in the United States, India and the EU, with more than 70 elections scheduled in 40 countries across the world. Democracy is built on trust, and trust must be built on the confidence that politicians on all sides are able to conduct the business of democracy free from interference.

Let me ask the Minister some specific questions about these revelations. First, is he confident that the Government have uncovered the full extent of the cyber-attack and every person who was affected?

Secondly, on the response, I welcome the announcement of the designation of two individuals following the hack of the Institute for Statecraft, but has any specific action been taken to respond to the cyber-attack on parliamentarians that the Minister has revealed today? If not, why not?

Thirdly, as we approach the general election, what additional steps are the Government taking to ensure the integrity of the democratic process? Will they make their officials available to ensure that Members on both sides of this House are free from interference; to train, equip and support Members and all staff to better identify and respond to the challenge; and to ensure not just that their digital communications are protected, but that their offices, staff and families are, too?

This revelation is shocking but not unexpected. It is the latest episode in a long pattern of hostile activities by Russia and other hostile states, including Iran and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, against Britain and our allies. There is more that we can do. Labour has committed to the establishment of a democratic resilience centre in Government to work with our allies to protect our democratic values, political institutions, elections and open societies. Will the Government commit

[Mr David Lammy]

to creating one? As the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), has outlined, we do not yet have a robust and long-lasting equivalent of the cross-Government counter-terrorism strategy—CONTEST—for dealing with hostile states. Will the Government commit to creating one?

Labour has proposed a joint cell between the Home Office and the Foreign Office to speed up decision making, share intelligence and expertise, and remove traditional barriers between Departments. Will the Government commit to creating one? They still have not amended terror legislation to allow the Government to ban hostile state-sponsored organisations that are undermining our national security. Will they commit to doing so? The Russia report has still not been fully implemented. Will the Government urgently update the House on when that will be completed?

This is not just about cyber-attacks and direct digital interference; it is about wider malign activity, including the use of artificial intelligence and deepfakes to seed false narratives, spread lies and foment divisions. That includes the widespread use of disinformation, misinformation and malinformation to undermine our democracy, through mainstream and social media, and other means. Labour has committed to urgently introducing binding regulation of companies developing the most powerful frontier AI, which could be used to disrupt elections. Will the Government commit to doing so too? Will they also commit to ensuring adequate resourcing for the National Cyber Security Centre, the intelligence agencies and the defending democracy taskforce?

I give the Minister every assurance that the Labour party will work in partnership and full co-operation with the Government and all relevant authorities to take every necessary step to address this threat and protect the integrity of our political process from hostile interference. As politicians from different parties, we have all stood united across the House against Putin's imperial aggression in Ukraine. That unity is a source of strength and pride. In the face of these threats, this House must remain united, Britain must remain united and democracies must remain united in defence of our institutions and against those who seek to undermine the great values that our society is founded upon.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for the tone and constructive content of the right hon. Gentleman's response. He is right to say that 2024 is a bumper year of elections, involving some 70 elections and billions of people across 40 countries. This is a matter of trust and confidence, which is why we have made this statement now, to ensure that its full deterrent effect is properly timed.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether we are confident that we have uncovered the full extent of the activity. We have a high degree of confidence with regard to this specific incident, but of course it is a question and our duty is to remain ever vigilant. The lesson of this sort of activity is that a higher degree of vigilance is necessary, and that is the posture that we now maintain in terms of any future activity.

I am grateful that the right hon. Gentleman welcomed the designation. Specific action has been taken by the NCSC, in accordance and together with House authorities,

to ensure that all of the individuals affected have a higher degree of preventive measures in place. The posture of the House authorities, and the security offer available, have been enhanced. However, as I have said, it is a matter of improved vigilance on all sides. As for additional steps we might take, there is the collective deterrent impact of our naming and shaming these individuals and designating them in our sanctions, as well as the diplomatic effort to call Russia out, combined with personal cyber-security measures on behalf of individuals—those important steps that all colleagues need to take.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the Whitehall structure in this area and pointed to his own policy of calling for a joint cell. We are confident that the defending democracy taskforce, led by the Security Minister, represents a robust and cross-departmental response. On the wider picture of disinformation, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need to up our game to counter disinformation, call Russia out and better resource and energise our own security posture in the cyber domain. That has been done; there is an enhanced degree of resource, organisation and political will. This public statement today is part of the hugely important deterrent effect.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Intelligence and Security Committee was one of the first to sound the alarm on this issue in its Russia report. More recently, we have highlighted the risk that China poses through interference in democratic discourse, for example, in think-tanks and universities. Will the Minister update the House on what action the Government are taking in response to the recommendations made in those two substantial reports?

Leo Docherty: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. Clearly, this statement is about Russia, but she draws a comparison with the activity of China. That is an appropriate reference and I am pleased that in our domestic legislation we have the ability to ensure that countries with malign intent do not use think-tanks or other fronts to influence domestic political discourse in a way that is contrary to the health of our democracy.

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

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Minister for prior sight of his statement. It makes for disturbing reading and I absolutely agree that Russia's actions are completely unacceptable. That Members of this House and others have had their email accounts hacked is deeply concerning, but we know that this has happened before—indeed, it is probably happening right now—and we must accept that it will almost certainly happen again.

As the Minister said, Russia's actions demonstrate a clear and persistent pattern of behaviour. Given that, have the Government considered making cyber-security training mandatory for all MPs and their staff? He will be aware of the belief that one of our weakest links in our cyber defences is our staff, who are constantly targeted by unscrupulous external actors. Although they are not House employees, it would be a reasonable precaution for MPs' staff to receive in-house training

on exactly what to look out for, how to avoid getting sucked into a trap and what they should do if they have even the slightest suspicion that they are being targeted.

Democracy is under attack. Just last week, the Canadian Government's Communications Security Establishment released a new report on cyber threats to elections saying that at least a quarter of national elections around the world were targeted by some manner of threat, and that China and Russia were the most active countries and were launching increasingly sophisticated influence operations by spreading disinformation and seeking to push elections in a specific direction. Perhaps most worryingly, the Canadian report states in relation to AI undermining elections:

"We assess it very likely that the capacity to generate deepfakes exceeds our ability to detect them."

With MPs facing having their emails hacked, the democratic process being undermined and the UK general election just around the corner, what are the Government doing to proactively defend the integrity of those elections, and when can the House expect to hear about it?

Leo Docherty: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's comments and questions. He is absolutely right about the scale of the threat. Alongside our calling Russia out and describing the nature of the threat, it is important that we point out that Russia has failed in its intent to undermine our domestic politics. It was a genuine attempt that failed, and we are now more aware and resilient. That is why we are calling Russia out, but we should also be proud that the institutions of our democracy remain resilient. Russia has failed in its efforts and it will continue to fail because we will continue to call it out.

The hon. Gentleman made a very good point about staff training. I do not think we should mandate that, but we have worked on a much-enhanced offer to ensure that cyber-security is, root and branch, part of the normal working practice of MPs and staff. That offer has radically improved. The House authorities will continue to keep colleagues up to date. A higher degree of awareness in our working practice is very important and that is part of the rationale behind today's statement.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's update. I am sure that I am not alone in having received a large number of template emails on particular subjects. When I have diligently written back to those individuals, they have said that they did not send the emails. It is quite clear that hostile actors are collecting our constituents' email addresses and using them to subvert the democratic process. Will my hon. Friend take the message not only back to the Foreign Office, but across the House, that this needs to be investigated and stopped?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. This practice, using emails to insert malware or to entice users to click on a malicious link, is sometimes extremely convincing. Staff have to deal with a great volume of such emails, which is why we are pleased that the House authorities have greater awareness. Staff should seek guidance from the House authorities on taking a more secure approach.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Minister contributed to a very good debate in the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, which met in Westminster earlier this week, and touched on some of these issues. We are clearly dealing with hybrid warfare—there is no other phrase for it.

Although I commend the Minister for coming to the House to give us this information, the response of sanctioning two people seems rather mild. Will he say more about that? Will he also say something about the co-ordination across western democracies and allies on next year's year of elections? We must all co-ordinate so that we can spot patterns in order to deal with this threat.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady should be reassured that, although today's announcement pertains to two individuals, it is indicative of a huge and sustained institutional effort to tackle this threat by way of a vastly improved defensive cyber-capability right across our nation. Our global response is working hand in glove with Five Eyes partners, and there is a huge diplomatic and security effort to make sure this activity is called out and pursued. That is not just deterrence; it is also enhanced resilience. Although the number of individuals is small, the hon. Lady should be reassured that the institutional work is tremendously well resourced and entirely determined.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. I am incredibly grateful to the Speaker's Office, the Security Minister and the House authorities for their work to increase our awareness and to improve our protection within Parliament, but we are in a very privileged position. Frankly, the fabric of our society that is most at risk are those parts that do not have access to such information, whether they are small and medium-sized enterprises that supply critical national infrastructure, whether they are the parts of the economy that keep us going or, indeed, whether they are those who protect our elections. Will the Minister speak a little about what protections and information will be offered to them so that they can support us?

Leo Docherty: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. This affects us all. It not only affects parliamentarians or those in public life; it affects those in commerce. The National Cyber Security Centre has published guidance and is available to provide guidance to those businesses that need to ensure they have a higher degree of cyber-security and resilience, particularly those involved in, for example, critical national infrastructure.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is a refreshing statement, but what action will be taken? This is a very serious challenge to our democracy. Indeed, it is not only a serious challenge to Members of Parliament. I know of a major takeover of a British company by a Chinese entity. The senior executives said that, when they attended meetings, the Chinese knew information about the company, its secrets and its background that they could have known only by illegal means. It is everywhere, and it is particularly coming from Russia, China and perhaps Iran and North Korea. Can we have action? Yes, we need to train our staff and Members of Parliament, but I was brainwashed as a child by the James Bond novels—maybe you were too,

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

Madam Deputy Speaker. We have a wonderful intelligence system, but are our intelligence services up to the job? Do they need more resources?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman asks about action. It is a good question, and I can give a good answer: in terms of our domestic legislation, we are now thankfully in a position to ensure that foreign countries with malign intent cannot freely invest in critical national infrastructure without the permission and outside the purview of Ministers. Ministers have taken specific action to ensure that divestment has taken place in certain commercial entities where a national interest is at stake, and that will continue to be the case. The Government posture has altered radically in recent years, and we should all be encouraged by that.

The hon. Gentleman made a welcome reference to James Bond. Of course, it is the Government's policy never to comment on the security services, but I can ensure the hon. Gentleman that they are up to speed and very well resourced.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): This is shocking, but not at all surprising. We have heard before about possible interference in the Brexit referendum, and then we had the Russia report, which was not implemented. We are on the cusp of a general election—which may come sooner rather than later—so my question to the Minister is, what conversations are being had with the Electoral Commission and the political parties, because it is not just MPs we need to think about, but candidates? Also, what plans does he have to take a whole-of-society approach so that voters can build resilience, and our democratic process and the ballot are completely secure?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady makes a good point and asks a good question. The threat is significant, but I should reiterate that it has failed, which I think points to the resilience of our democratic institutions. That does not mean that we should not be eternally vigilant—we will be. That work involves all parties across the House and candidates. A lot of the preventive work is being carried out by the Defending Democracy Taskforce, which is specifically looking at this issue under the Security Minister. The hon. Lady should be reassured that they have the bit between their teeth.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. What we have seen is malevolent behaviour, and I am glad to hear some of the Government's plans. However, Labour is committed to establishing a

democratic resilience centre, so can I press the Minister to ensure that the Government consider following our lead?

Leo Docherty: That work is already in place under the Defending Democracy Taskforce and the wholly re-energised and newly founded National Cyber Security Centre, established under this Government with tremendous resource and energy. Whatever we call it, there is now a significant effort to ensure that we deter these things and that MPs and everyone across the political spectrum are in a much more secure position.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): As a new Member of this House, I obviously find this statement concerning. Will the Minister therefore outline some of the additional support that can be offered to new Members and their staff, particularly because there is a lot to navigate? There is an induction process, which I welcome because it has helped very much, but there was about 10 minutes on cyber-security, so it definitely could do with being updated.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Lady makes a good point, and she is absolutely right. An improved and enhanced offer is being worked up together with the House authorities. Cyber-security and cyber-hygiene should be a default daily practice. All colleagues should be aware of the offer, and it should be made available to all colleagues and staff.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his statement. Our Government have been prepping for cyber-warfare for some time. Indeed, the rationale behind lessening investment in recruitment into the armed forces has been that cyber-warfare is a bigger threat. That being the case, will the Minister confirm that the Government are prepared to act, should these newspaper claims have even a slither of truth? How can we send the message today that the UK is prepared to face the cyber-threat as readily as any other threat?

Leo Docherty: We are well placed. The threat is significant, and the risk to national resilience is significant in the cyber-age. The Deputy Prime Minister has led a huge amount of work on national resilience. Defensive cyber is an important part of that, and the National Cyber Security Centre has an important role to play. The challenge is huge, but the Government have covered a huge amount of ground. However, there is more work to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for his statement.

Business of the House

11.24 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt):

The business for the week commencing 11 December will include the following:

MONDAY 11 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill.

TUESDAY 12 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 13 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Finance Bill.

THURSDAY 14 DECEMBER—A general debate on knife crime, followed by a general debate on the potential merger of Three and Vodafone. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 15 DECEMBER—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 December will include the following:

MONDAY 18 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill.

TUESDAY 19 DECEMBER—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Post Office (Horizon System) Compensation Bill.

The House will rise for the Christmas recess at the conclusion of business on Tuesday 19 December and return on Monday 8 January 2024.

11.25 am

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Let me first pay tribute to two Labour giants who have passed away in the past week.

Alistair Darling was one of the guiding hands in the last Labour Government. He was one of only three Ministers who served in the Cabinet throughout the entire period, most notably as Chancellor during the global economic crisis. His calm, decisive and comprehensive response helped to save our economy, and his leadership rightly earned him global and cross-party plaudits. Glenys Kinnock, whose later years were stolen by the awful effects of Alzheimer's, will be remembered for her political leadership alongside Neil, but also, very much in her own right, for social justice, women's rights, and international development. Glenys was a true sister who supported and encouraged a generation of women into politics, including me, and our dear friend Jo Cox. Our thoughts are with their families.

So, Madam Deputy Speaker, what a mess: as the Home Secretary finally unveiled his Rwanda Bill, the Immigration Minister resigned in disgust. Emergency legislation, and now an emergency reshuffle—and, as we speak, an emergency press conference: it is total chaos. The Government are now in freefall, unable to govern, and all the while families are worried about paying their bills and affording Christmas. The Prime Minister is so weak that he cannot convince his own side, satisfying no one and inflaming them all. We all want to stop the boats, but many on the Government Benches now agree with us that this plan is unworkable.

Unlike the Home Secretary yesterday, perhaps the Leader of the House can tell us how the plan will work. How many illegal migrants will be sent to Rwanda? The treaty says that the number is capped, and the small print says that it is just 100 people. What is the extent of

our reciprocal arrangement to take refugees from Rwanda? Will we take more from Rwanda than we are sending there, and when will this happen? The Northern Ireland Secretary did not have a clue this morning.

Will the Leader of the House confirm that anyone who loses the right to remain in Rwanda—for example, those who commit serious criminal offences—must be returned to the UK? We now learn that it was the Rwandan Government who insisted that international law must be upheld. Is it the Government's view that international treaties did need to be overridden? The Home Secretary could not say how the treaty and the Bill deal with appeals and legal challenges. Can the Leader of the House assure us that this policy will not get clogged up in the courts all over again? The Prime Minister did not convince people just now.

Can the Leader of the House commit herself to publishing the Government's estimates of the costs of this plan? The Prime Minister has just said at his press conference that he wants the Bill to be passed in record time, so why will it not go into Committee before Christmas? The answer is that he cannot persuade his own side.

Let me say this to the Leader of the House. The truth is that this plan will not work. I know it, she knows it, they know it. That is why the Immigration Minister resigned, and that is why he said that these measures were

"a triumph of hope over experience."

That is why the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), said this morning that the truth is that

"it won't work and it will not stop the boats".

She also said:

"We can't keep failing the British people."

This is now the third piece of legislation in two years, all trying and failing to do the same thing. It is the very definition of flogging a dead horse. But it is not just the policy that is dead, but the whole sorry Government—failed, divided, defunct and incapable of governing.

Finally, in further evidence of the Government's death throes, this week the Prime Minister suffered his first Commons defeat, over the infected blood scandal. So off is their judgment that they could not even support a measured, reasonable amendment from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) to set up a body to administer compensation immediately, as recommended by Sir Brian Langstaff, who led the inquiry. On reflection, does the Leader of the House not think that they have just got this one badly wrong, and will she now ensure that this amendment survives the passage of the Bill? In fact, the Government's former Paymaster General told the infected blood inquiry:

"I believe it to be inevitable that the Government will need to provide substantial compensation... I believe we should begin preparing for this now, before the inquiry reports",

adding that it is "a moral obligation."

That Minister wrote to the now Prime Minister, then the Chancellor, twice to press their case, never to get a reply. That Minister is now the Leader of the House, so can she tell us: does she still agree with herself?

Penny Mordaunt: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute and sending my sympathies to the families of Alistair Darling and Glenys Kinnock. I did not know Glenys Kinnock, but I did know Alistair a little, and we

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

will miss his very dry sense of humour. I am sure that all our thoughts are with their friends and families. I also wish Mr Speaker a speedy recovery.

I will also take this opportunity to wish Jewish people around the world a happy Hanukkah. It is a festival of light overcoming darkness, and that is as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago. I know the celebrations will be more difficult this year for everyone, but I also know that Jewish people across this country will celebrate over these eight days as a symbol of Jewish pride. I am sure all in this place will want to wish everyone celebrating “Chag Hanukkah sameach.”

The hon. Lady raises the important matter of the infected blood scandal, and she is right: I was the Minister who set up the compensation scheme. I felt it important that it run concurrently with the inquiry, rather than having to wait until the inquiry reported and then set up that piece of work. Sir Robert Francis has done a very good job and the Minister for the Cabinet Office is now doing the heavy lifting on putting the scheme together. I have met with him on several occasions, and I know he is completely committed to that and is working hard on it. I point out to the hon. Lady that I could not have got the compensation scheme study established without the blessing of the Chancellor at the time. That person is now Prime Minister, and I know that he is committed to delivering on it.

I want to reassure all those who are infected and affected by the scandal that this Government have not only established an inquiry, after many decades of this injustice being done, but established a compensation study. We have done that for a reason, because we wish to deliver and bring justice to this group of people. We are the first Government to have done that and, if we can do that in short order, I think that would be something to be very proud of.

It is great to see the Labour party channelling the right of the Conservative party—channelling Mrs Thatcher recently on borders, on fiscal responsibility and on her crusade for workers, wealth creators, carers and protectors. Unfortunately, the party is simultaneously plotting to destroy all that she built and stood for. I knew Margaret Thatcher, and I can tell the hon. Lady that the Leader of the Opposition is no Margaret Thatcher. It will take rather more than a light perm, pearls and a handbag for him to pull off that look. He will need to get a backbone. He will need to get some principles. He will need to rethink the Labour party's stance on our Rwanda policy and our border controls. He will need to rethink borrowing £28 billion more. He might also like to stand up for the public and support our minimum service levels agreements. He might like to reject the demands of the TUC, which wants to repeal all the reforms that Maggie brought in. He might like to call out the British Medical Association's cruel plans to cancel operations and cancel Christmas for thousands of elderly people in care. He might like to call out the immoral ask of unions to transport workers, who will have to forgo pay over Christmas. In fairness, the great lady did say:

“You turn if you want to”,

and Labour's leader has jolly well done so, several times on his leadership pledges and on almost every policy announced since he became leader. If she was the iron lady, he is the ironic man.

The hon. Lady asked about Rwanda. I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). He helped the Prime Minister reduce boat crossings by a third in the last year—more than any Minister and Prime Minister have achieved. We must ensure that our asylum and immigration systems are fit for purpose, and we must protect and control our borders—the public are right in their demand that we do so. The treaty and the legislation will enable us to operationalise the Rwanda policy. Will they be enough to do all we need to do? No, but we will have other tools as well. Will they help to give us more options and to deter people from making the terrible crossing across the channel? Yes, they will.

The Opposition have put forward no alternative plan. My question to them is: what is the objection? It cannot be a legal one, because the policy does not break international law, and nor does it blur the distinction between lawmakers and those who interpret the law. It cannot be a moral objection, because it is a moral crusade to use every tool that we have to end the trafficking of human beings. It cannot be a policy objection, because the Labour party has no alternative policy. It has voted against every single measure that we have introduced to protect our borders. It voted against the last Bill more than 70 times. Labour has fought us on ending free movement and the deportation of foreign criminals, and it has said it would take an additional 110,000 people per year from Europe. As I said, ironic.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Last night, the Labour-led administration at Staffordshire Moorlands District Council voted to increase council allowances by 44%, at a cost of £400,000 to council tax payers. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate about local authority spending and how we can make sure that council tax payers get value for money?

Penny Mordaunt: As my right hon. Friend asked her question, there were audible gasps across the Chamber. That is an incredible lack of local political leadership. Council tax payers in her district will be disappointed to hear that news. If she were to apply for a debate, I am sure that it would be well attended. I am sure that everyone would urge restraint and want to ensure the best value possible for people's hard-earned cash.

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

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is tempting to forestall and dismantle now any spin that the Leader of the House may be inclined to bring up on Scottish education issues, given Westminster's shocking record. Following her outburst against Scotland's health service workers last week, I must clear up some things. Scotland watches her “odd” weekly rants, as the Scottish press dubs them, with concern and alarm. Let me give some useful facts for her and Scotland about the Scottish NHS: health funding is at record highs; staffing levels are also at a record high, with far more staff per head than England; we have the best performing A&E units and the highest number of GPs per head in the UK, no prescriptions charges, and still not a single day lost to industrial disputes in the Scottish NHS. There is always room for improvement but, as the Leader of the House

reaches for her latest penny dreadful script, she can rest assured that I will be happy to set the record straight, wherever her imagination takes her.

Meanwhile, the Government plumb new depths with their immigration panic measures, which are so damaging to Scotland in particular. *The Daily Telegraph* columnist Tim Stanley has written:

“A friend has messaged me in a blind panic”.

If they fall in love and marry someone from overseas, must they have an income of £38,700 to settle here? He went on to say:

“Something like 75% of us earn less than that. Is it fair to limit family formation to the rich? Is it conservative...to divide families?

Of course, it is fine if someone is rich, so maybe it is.

If we, our children or our grandchildren fall in love with someone from another country—many of us do so on our travels; I am living proof of that—they will not be able to join us here unless we have guaranteed earnings nearing £39,000. Cue a further exodus of our young people from these shores to other countries with a more enlightened approach to migration and their citizens’ human rights. Even worse, those who have already gone through the process and who thought that they had won the right to live here in peace will have to come up with that figure the next time their visa is extended. Should Parliament not have debated these extreme measures first? Can the Leader of the House defend this shameful policy, or are she and other Ministers threatening to resign?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady. I would ask her to go and have a look at the SNP’s record on education. I have spoken about that in the last two business question sessions, so I shall not detain the House any longer on it. I think everyone in this Chamber is aware of the SNP’s appalling record on destroying the education system in Scotland—the only people who are not are those in charge of it.

The hon. Lady mentioned the NHS and pay settlements, and the theme of her question is really values and morality. Does she think it would be moral if a Government denied faster NHS treatment to its citizens post covid because they did not want to send them to an English hospital? I understand that the former Health Secretary made that offer to the First Minister and it was rejected. Is it moral to offer a pay deal, as she boasts, to public sector workers, including NHS workers, without a plan to pay for it? Come to think of it, is it moral to withhold funds designated for business rate relief from businesses? Would she describe it as moral if a Government denied their citizens the ability to have a civil partnership—she speaks of relationships—with their opposite-sex partner for a year, including those who were terminally ill, because they did not want the UK Government to legislate on their behalf?

While the hon. Lady is looking up the SNP’s record on education, I would ask her also to check how many concurrent police investigations there are into the SNP’s antics. Owing to her party’s antics, I am afraid her quest to take the moral high ground is stuck at a subterranean level. But given that she has, as is standard SNP operating procedure, played the man as well as the ball, I will set the record straight on my own record with regard to refugees. I spent time over two years looking after the most desperate and vulnerable people in the eastern

bloc after the Romanian revolution. More recently, I have spent time on the water in the Mediterranean and northern Libya tracking migration and people-trafficking routes. When I was in Greece and Italy, I saw how the EU’s biometric scanners in its southern ports had not even been uncovered and unwrapped, and how Europe’s security was being failed. I have opened my home to refugees: I have been hosting a Ukrainian refugee since May last year, and before that I offered my home to Afghan refugees.

I can tell the hon. Lady that migration is one of the most critical issues facing our country and the world, and that the global rules on it are broken. I have made it my business to understand how we can fix them—that is our duty—and it will take global leadership to build the tools to rewrite those rules. If we do it, I think other nations will follow. I would ask her to really check what her duty is in this manner and consider supporting our legislation.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Yesterday the Welsh language broadcaster S4C published the most damning and shocking report about bullying within the organisation and the fear in which staff had to conduct their duties and responsibilities. That is a publicly funded organisation. May we have a debate on this issue and on the report so that we can properly consider how we can offer the best stability for the channel, as well as offering a bright future for those who work for it? It is extremely important for Welsh culture, the Welsh language, and Welsh jobs and industry in this vital sector.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this shocking situation. S4C is an incredibly important service to culture and education, and we want that organisation also to enshrine UK and Welsh values at its heart. Given that Culture, Media and Sport questions is not until 11 January, I will write this afternoon on his behalf and ensure that the Culture Secretary has heard of this appalling situation. I hope that it will swiftly become a happier one.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the Backbench Business for next Thursday. Before those two debates, there will be a Select Committee statement on a Home Affairs Committee report on human trafficking, which will be published tomorrow. I also thank her for our meeting earlier this week and reiterate my request that she gives us an early indication of any Backbench Business Committee time in the week beginning 8 January so that we can allocate that business prior to the Christmas recess.

In my role as Chair of the Committee, Members from across the House often ask me questions, thinking that I benefit from a level of inside knowledge or political insight. One question that I am repeatedly asked is, “Do you know the recess dates following Christmas?” On behalf of Members across the House, I ask that question of the Leader of the House; possibly she will let us know next week, before the Christmas recess.

I have been contacted by a number of constituents regarding the new proposed earnings threshold of £38,700 to be eligible for a spouse visa. Will that new threshold

[*Ian Mearns*]

apply to new applicants only or to existing visa holders already resident in the UK and validly here, looking to extend their stay? It could jeopardise families who are legally here, gainfully employed and making a positive contribution if they are possibly having the rules changed underneath them.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his always helpful adverts for future Backbench Business debates. As he knows, I will endeavour to give him early warning of when other time can be scheduled; I will endeavour to do that shortly.

I completely agree on recess dates and hope to be able to update colleagues very soon. That point is well understood not just in terms of people's ability to organise family life but for its particular significance for those right hon. and hon. Members who are farmers. I will therefore endeavour to do that very shortly.

I had anticipated the type of questions that the hon. Gentleman would ask. I am sure that there are particular sectors on which people will want to focus, such as armed forces personnel, so I have asked the Department to produce some further briefing on this matter and to share it with all hon. Members.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will be prioritising those who did not contribute to the earlier urgent question and statement.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Can we have a debate on antisemitism in higher education? This week, the presidents of Harvard, MIT and Penn appeared before the United States Congress, and when asked repeatedly about whether calling for genocide of Jews breaks the university code of conduct and was harassment, they said that it “depends on the context” and whether the speech turned into actual genocidal conduct. It is impossible to imagine a call for mass murder of any other minority group being said to depend on the context. A call for the mass murder of black people or gay people would rightly not be tolerated for a moment. This is top-level institutional Jew hatred at the highest levels of academia, and sadly universities in the United Kingdom are also infested with antisemitism. Does the Leader of the House agree that British students must be protected from such poison?

Penny Mordaunt: I completely agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. The individuals from Harvard, MIT and Penn who gave that jaw-dropping evidence earlier this week have done the academic community a favour: this should be a wake-up call on how abhorrent some of these policies are and how they are being interpreted. It is amazing that it needs to be said, but if a code of conduct permits the advocacy and promotion of mass murder, it might need a redraft.

There is a wider point here: we look to these academic institutions to be the guardian of the values that we hold dear. Freedom of speech and freedom of thought are very important to academic inquiry and our democratic values, but we cannot in any way tolerate the promotion of genocide and the extermination of a group of people. It is absolutely abhorrent. I commend the work of the

Union of Jewish Students, which does a huge amount on our campuses. It has delivered more than 100 anti-semitism awareness training sessions to about 3,000-plus campus leaders in the UK. We should support its work, and I hope that every vice-chancellor and university board will be asking to see these policies to ensure that they are in good shape.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Sellafield is one of our most sensitive sites for energy and national security. New reports in *The Guardian* have revealed a damaging and potentially ongoing cyber-security breach by groups linked to Russia and China. They call into question the management and workplace culture, the performance of senior staff, who are now under investigation by the Office for Nuclear Regulation, and the response and performance of the regulator itself. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate or ministerial statement on those deeply worrying revelations?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the reports that have been in the press, which I know are of concern to her. As the date for the next Home Office questions has not yet been announced, I will write on her behalf to the Security Minister and ask whether he and his officials can update her.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Sometimes there is a sporting achievement that simply cannot go without comment. Over the last year, Red Bull Racing smashed through every record in the Formula 1 season, winning 21 of the 22 races. That magic can happen on track only because of the incredible British business, based up the road from my constituency in Milton Keynes, and its innovation, excellence, skills and engineering superiority. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Christian Horner and the whole Red Bull team on their success this year, and can we have a debate on the value of motor sport and those skills to the wider economy?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure that the whole House will join my hon. Friend in congratulating the Red Bull team. We should be proud that this country is the home of motor sport. It is not just the many businesses in his local area, but the incredible supply chain across the whole of the UK. He will know how to apply for a debate. I am sure that many Members would wish to attend. I shall borrow from the legendary Murray Walker in saying that the request for a debate on this very important topic is go, go, go!

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Moles, Bath's wonderful grassroots music venue, was sadly forced to close its doors last week. It was an incubator for many new talents and gave many household names their first chance on stage. Without grassroots venues, there will be no music industry. More than 100 small music venues were forced to close their doors in the UK last year due to cost pressures that they could not meet. Can we have a debate in Government time about the importance of our small music venues?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about that, and I am sure the hon. Lady speaks for many of her constituents who will miss that facility. We have managed to get a lot of organisations through the terrible few years that we have had, particularly with the pandemic,

but we need to build back what we have lost and organisations that are fragile. She will know that the next questions to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport are on 11 January. I know that my right hon. and learned Friend is very much looking at ensuring that we are disbursing all the available support right across the country, and that it reaches every constituency. I encourage the hon. Lady to raise the matter with her then.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Last week, for Small Business Saturday, I crowned the winner of my new independent shop of the year competition. On The Brakes is a fantastic bike shop in Leigh-on-Sea specialising in bike maintenance, custom builds, and education and bike repairs. It stormed to victory. Given that 98% of businesses in Southend West are small and micro, is that not living proof of the importance of independent businesses to our economy? Could we have a debate, please, in Government time, on the importance of independent businesses to our high streets and to our national economy?

Penny Mordaunt: I pass on my congratulations, as I am sure does everyone in the Chamber, to On The Brakes for all its work. It is clearly valued by its local community. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who took part in Small Business Saturday last weekend. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: such businesses are the lifeblood of our economy, locally and nationally. They also provide amazing community facilities and support for so many in our constituencies. She will know how to apply for a debate, and I am sure it will be well attended.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Many famous people have been born at the Whittington maternity unit, including the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). This summer, I had the joy of visiting the maternity unit with my good friend my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), but we noticed that the facilities are desperately old and crumbling. Does the Leader of the House agree that we desperately need a debate on maternity units across the UK and that we urgently need more funding, so that the buildings can come up to a really good standard to match our aspirations, as outlined in the Care Quality Commission reports, which say that 55% of our units across the UK are not up to scratch? We need those crucial amounts of funding, so that we can bring up the standard of those crumbling buildings to match the aspirations of women giving birth in our maternity units.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady will know that the quality of maternity care, which is not just about healthcare practice but about the facilities, has been a particular recent focus of the Department of Health and Social Care. We have a capital programme that is regenerating our facilities and building new ones, too. Health questions dates have not been announced yet, so I will write on the hon. Lady's behalf and flag this matter with the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Every single week, I receive correspondence from and meet parents who are simply exasperated by the wait they face for a child

and adolescent mental health services assessment for their children. For children to be educated properly and looked after in the best possible way, it is paramount that children receive their assessments as soon as possible and that families do not face unacceptable waits of up to three years, as many do in Darlington. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must speed up CAMHS assessments? Can we have a debate on that important issue?

Penny Mordaunt: A three-year wait is a truly shocking statistic, and my hon. Friend's constituents should not find themselves in that situation. I thank him for what he is doing to campaign on this issue. He will know that we are investing an extra £2.3 billion a year by March next year to support an additional 2 million people, which includes 345,000 children and young people. The situation in his constituency sounds acute, and I will write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on his behalf this afternoon and ask that her officials and Ministers get in touch with his office to see what can be done in the interim to bring that waiting time down and ensure that every child and young person is getting the support they need.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): May I draw the Leader of the House's attention to the career of Geraldine Bradley, the catering services manager at Ballykeel Primary School in County Antrim in my constituency? Geraldine Bradley has worked there for 42 years, without a single absentee day or sick day. That is an absolutely incredible contribution to public service. She caters currently for 430 pupils in that school, and has done so with excellence. Over the years, she has fed and nourished thousands of pupils across the constituency. How can I best encourage other people in the public sector who engage in public service with such enthusiasm to look at the example that Geraldine has set and apply it to their own careers?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure we will all join the hon. Gentleman in sending our thanks, congratulations and good wishes to Geraldine. What an incredible public servant, and what a life of service. She should be held up as an example to all in the public sector, and I am sure that as well as providing the nutrition that the pupils at that school need, she has provided many happy times and happy memories. We wish her well, and the hon. Gentleman has provided the answer to his own question by putting that on the record today.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The headline of Christina Lamb's article in *The Sunday Times* at the weekend was

"First Hamas fighters raped her. Then they shot her in the head".

In the light of the profoundly disturbing revelations in that article about sexual violence committed by Hamas on 7 October, may we have a ministerial statement so that the Government can set out the action they will take to raise this issue in international fora such as the UN, some of which have been far too slow to recognise and condemn that aspect of the Hamas atrocity?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for allowing us to state on the record the appalling atrocities that many women—many of whom did not survive those attacks—had to endure at the hands of Hamas,

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including rape, but also the most horrific torture and mutilation. I think we are all very disappointed that organisations to which we look to show leadership on these matters were not swifter and more robust in their condemnation of those appalling atrocities and acts.

We spend a great deal of time thinking about our own aid allocation in this respect, and fund many schemes around the world that have had huge success in reducing violence against women and girls. I will ensure that the Minister with that responsibility in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has heard what my right hon. Friend has said, and we will reflect on what more we can do and what more we can say we expect from the organisations that we work with on these matters around the world.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Government have rightly made time in this Chamber to debate that terrible conflict. The Israel-Gaza war is equally horrific, from the killing of Israelis on 7 October to the deaths of thousands of Palestinian civilians that continue daily. No doubt the Backbench Business Committee would look sympathetically on a request for a debate, but should this not be debated in Government time? May we have a day's debate on it as soon as possible?

Penny Mordaunt: I fully understand the hon. Gentleman's request. On his first point, he will know that the Foreign Secretary has been in Washington talking with our partners both about Ukraine and the ongoing situation in Israel and Gaza. I will certainly ensure that both he and his Minister in the Commons, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), have heard the hon. Gentleman's request.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Our hard-pressed and hard-working police have had their leave cancelled, have been required to work overtime and are at breaking point just policing organised protests. To make it even worse, the Just Stop Oil brigade refuses to engage with the police about its protests. The Metropolitan police says that it has now cost taxpayers £20 million to deal with those Just Stop Oil protesters, so may we have an oral statement on police funding and what will be done to stop those protesters bringing London to a halt?

Penny Mordaunt: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all the work that the police have done. Since we have given them some new powers, they have done an incredible job ensuring that activists do not disrupt traffic or stop emergency vehicles and keeping areas running, including our major motorways and, in particular, our capital city. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that those protests are costing taxpayers and using police resources—if he were to found a campaign called Just Stop It, Just Stop Oil, I think it would be very well supported. I will ensure that the Home Secretary has heard his concerns about resourcing.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): First, may I associate myself with the comments of the shadow Leader of the House about Alistair Darling? He was someone I knew. He was a huge figure in Scottish politics, and the perfect example of a public servant.

I also wish to pay tribute to Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, the former Conservative MP for Edinburgh West, who was always the perfect gentleman and another example to us all of public service.

A constituent of mine recently raised the issue that he and a number of other marines had been exposed to asbestos during a training exercise. They are currently trying to pursue an adequate response from the Ministry of Defence on this potential breach of health and safety. Can the Government find time for us to discuss both this issue and the general issue of how we better protect our armed forces on training exercises?

Penny Mordaunt: May I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Lady about Lord Douglas-Hamilton? I am sure that all Members would join her in that.

The hon. Lady raises a very important matter. I know that, in recent years, the Ministry of Defence has been looking at how it can mitigate things that happen and injuries caused on training exercises, from its joint service publication to ensuring that people have the right equipment and that it is all in good order. The issue that she raises would be of most interest to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. I will make sure that he has heard what she has said, and I think the topic would be an excellent one for an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): Barrow and Furness recently celebrated 150 years of naval shipbuilding, supplying the submarines that keep us safe now and long into the future. As the shipyard delivers Dreadnought and now leans into the opportunity of AUKUS, it remains pivotal to the UK and the world's security. Given that position, I have joined a campaign to try to secure for Barrow and Furness the title of royal town. The initiative is supported by the Lord Lieutenant, BAE Systems, the local council, CandoFM, the Rotary Club and local arts and community groups. I wonder whether the Leader of the House might be able to advise me on how we can gain Government support for this initiative.

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign, which sounds like a very good initiative. I know that he is doing a whole raft of things to put the town of Barrow on the map. He is right to say that this contribution provides security not just to the UK, but to the world, particularly because of the AUKUS agreement and our work with our Five Eyes partners. He will know that royal title applications are run through the Cabinet Office. Each decision is made on a case-by-case basis. I would be very happy to meet him and give him any further information that he needs as his campaign gathers and generates support.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Government claim to be on the side of business. Mayphil Industries, a global company with headquarters in Merthyr Tydfil, has been trying, with my support, to secure a visa for essential training for a senior executive from Sri Lanka. The visa was approved on 3 October, but has not been issued. Two months really is not satisfactory. Perhaps, if the Government have an Immigration Minister, we could have a debate in Government time to discuss what can be done to support situations such as this and to make progress and improve the service for constituents.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about that situation. That should not be the case at all. The hon. Gentleman will know that the Home Office is providing individual surgery opportunities for Members of Parliament, either face to face or remotely, so that Members can chase up these issues. If he gives me the details, I would be very happy to do that immediately after this session. This business should not be held up getting in the person that it needs. As the House has had my undivided attention, I do not have the latest news on appointments, but I shall also ensure that the Minister for Immigration has heard his concerns.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend had a chance to look at early-day motion 114?

[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.]

If so, is she impressed by the fact that the motion has the support of not only Conservative Members but quite a lot of Opposition Members, including the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell)? The motion calls on the Government to bring forward a debate before the ban on XL bully-type dogs is implemented at the end of December. She will know that some 650,000 people across the country have already signed a petition against what the Government are proposing, because it is not only unfair but very vague. Many dog owners do not know whether their dogs will be included. This is most unsatisfactory legislation. Should it not be debated in this House before it is implemented?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for putting that on the record, and I think that is very helpful. He will know the motivation for bringing in the legislation, but of course we need to provide clarity and reassurance to pet owners. Given that the date of the next DEFRA questions has not been announced, I will write on his behalf to alert the Secretary of State to early-day motion 114 and to ensure he has heard what my hon. Friend has said.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you will allow me to pay a short tribute to Alistair Darling. Alistair and I worked together in home affairs throughout Roy Hattersley and Neil Kinnock's leadership. He was a great colleague and friend, and of course did a magnificent job as Chancellor in our darkest days. Glenys Kinnock was also a long-term, old friend. My daughter worked for her as a special adviser. She was family, and we miss her terribly.

This is something of a personal appeal to the Leader of the House. I am a pretty robust individual, and I think everyone in the House knows I am quite resilient. However, about 18 months ago I had a death threat from a gentleman who said he was coming to London to kill me. Over these last 18 months, this has absolutely haunted me. My home is now a fortress, my office is well protected and everything physically has been done to support me, but there is very little support, or not enough support, when a Member gets into this sort of situation.

The gentleman who was coming to do nasty things to me was sectioned, but when he came out of the mental health hospital, all the administration told me was, "He

is out, and he knows where you live". I have to say that this 18 months has been a time of dreadful personal stress, and if it had not been for the support of my family and friends, I do not think I would have got through it. I have experienced at first hand what it is like to be frightened to stand close to the railway station platform or on the tube, and to be looking behind you all the time. My mental health, and I am a robust individual, has been very much put under stress, but this should not happen to Members of the House. May I make an appeal to the Leader of the House to look at this kind of support—not just at the huge amount of money that has been spent on my fortress home, but at individual support—because I think every Member deserves better?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I am sure I do so on behalf of everyone in the Chamber and all colleagues, for saying that. Of course, he will know that Mr Speaker and the House authorities have done a huge amount of additional work, including some more recent things, to ensure that all colleagues are protected and have the physical security and support they need. However, he is absolutely right to put on record that this has a toll on an individual's wellbeing, resilience and mental health. It is a terrible thing to have to endure. Of course, right hon. and hon. Members endure this in relation not just to harm to themselves, but to their families, their children and their staff, which is a very great weight to carry.

I will certainly ensure that the House authorities, and Mr Speaker when he returns, have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said, and we will see what more we can do to support Members. I add that we have concluded the largest survey of Members on this, and I know many Members filled it in with their staff. For mental health and resilience, whether because of threats or the other issues people have to deal with—I know my staff were traumatised when we were dealing with Operation Pitting, for example—additional mental health and pastoral support is very much needed. I know there is an action plan following the survey, and I thank all Members who took part in it.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): May I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) for his brave contribution? That was difficult to do, and I am sorry to hear what he has been going through.

To segue inelegantly from that, in Oxfordshire I have been contacted by residents who rely on their pets for their mental health, who are concerned that when they go on walks, their pets go into rivers and then get sick. I can understand their concern because discharges in Oxfordshire are up 18%. We heard just this week that the water quality at Port meadow in Oxfordshire has been rated poor for the third year in a row, which means it risks losing its bathing water status. Will the Leader of the House help me press the Government to take this threat to pets seriously? In answer to a parliamentary question, they say they do not measure it. How can we get them to?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear about the situation in the hon. Lady's constituency and local area. The date of the next Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions has not been announced, so I will write to the Secretary

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of State to make sure that he has heard what she has said. She will know there has been recent debate about what the Environment Agency and other monitoring bodies are actually monitoring, how it is being monitored and what is in the public domain, and about making sure that the monitoring systems of individual water companies are really fit for purpose. I will write on the hon. Lady's behalf today.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to an emerging problem? The Department for Work and Pensions requires an estimated 5,000 net increase in staff every quarter if it is to undertake the increased workload arising from recent Government announcements, including some very recent ones. Yet the shocking new dossier published this week by the Public and Commercial Services Union warns that the target is nowhere near being met. Staff morale is at rock bottom due to excessive workloads, real-terms pay cuts and new restrictions on home working. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the staffing crisis in the DWP, and will she urge her ministerial colleagues to meet the PCS trade union as a matter of urgency to try to find a way forward?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this to the House's attention and mine. I will certainly raise it with the Secretary of State. It is incredibly important for the general public that staff are able to answer their inquiries. There may be more we can do in this place in providing swift answers to people in the DWP who will want to know what recent announcements mean for them, and I think we can also provide a great deal of reassurance to members of the public in that respect. The next Work and Pensions questions will be on 18 December, and he can raise the matter then, but I shall also write on his behalf.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Punitive disciplinary policies in schools are significantly harming children's mental health, particularly neurodivergent children. It seems that multi-academy trust leaders are not accountable for their actions and are impossible to hold to account, not least at South Bank MAT, where children are experiencing significant harm, school refusal and an escalation in issues with their mental wellbeing. Can we have an urgent debate on calling the leadership of multi-academy trusts to account and ensuring that governance structures are fit for purpose?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. On the general point, I shall make sure that the Secretary of State has heard what she has said, and she can raise it directly with her next week. If the hon. Lady wants to pass on to me the specific details of the academy trust she is speaking about, I shall make sure that the Secretary of State has also heard about that. There are mechanisms for holding trusts to account on certain things, and ensuring that they are meeting children's special educational needs is one of those things. I shall make sure that the Department has heard about it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for the opportunity to ask a question on the state of freedom of religion or belief. Many events

in the House this week have rightly celebrated the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration on human rights, including a debate in Westminster Hall this afternoon in which I will be participating. However, in the Philippines this week at least four people were killed and many more injured in an attack on a Catholic mass, for which Islamic State has claimed responsibility. An investigation into that attack is ongoing. Will the Leader of the House join me in denouncing the attack, calling for care and justice for the victims and assuring them that they have the support of the House of Commons, the greatest seat of democracy and the mother of Parliaments, and that we are doing our best for them?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for again affording the House the opportunity to send our thoughts, prayers and good wishes to everyone who has been affected by that appalling attack. Every week, he brings the attention of the House and the world to such events, which perhaps do not grab a lot of headlines. It is important that we send a clear message that we are focused on these issues and will do everything we can to ensure that everyone in the world is allowed to exercise their religious freedom. I thank him again for enabling us to do that this week following the appalling atrocity in the Philippines. I thank him also for the advert for the important debate this afternoon.

Sir Christopher Chope: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I can take only points of order that relate directly to the business statement. Is that the case?

Sir Christopher Chope: It is, Madam Deputy Speaker. In answering my question about early-day motion 114, the Leader of the House said that she would write to the DEFRA Minister about it. However, when the subject was debated on 27 November in Westminster Hall, I asked the DEFRA Minister whether he would facilitate a debate on the statutory instrument, saying that it 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".

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), responded:

"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."—[*Official Report*, 27 November 2023; Vol. 741, c. 223-24WH.]

I wonder whether that discussion ever took place. We are now in a situation where the Leader of the House says she relies on DEFRA to organise a debate, and a DEFRA Minister says it is for parliamentary business managers to organise. Who is in charge, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I think that was a slight extension of business questions rather than a point of order. Is the hon. Gentleman's point of order that he wishes to know how to gain further clarification on the matter?

Sir Christopher Chope indicated assent.

Penny Mordaunt *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is lucky that the Leader of the House is still here, and she indicates that she wishes to make a response to his point of order.

Penny Mordaunt: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) is a very experienced and diligent parliamentarian. He has done everything right: he has pursued the Department and not had satisfaction from it, and when right hon. and hon. Members do not have satisfaction from a Department, they must bring their issues to business questions. I hope they know that I will always follow up on their behalf, and I will do so in the case of my hon. Friend. I will ensure that conversation takes place and I will put pen to paper this afternoon.

BBC Funding

12.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the BBC.

The BBC is a great British institution and plays a vital role in our culture and creative economy. It broadcasts our values and identities all over the world, reaching hundreds of millions of people every day. In January 2022, the Government and BBC agreed a six-year funding settlement, which froze the licence fee at £159 for two years. The two-year freeze has already saved every fee payer £17 over 2022 and 2023. That settlement provided vital support for households when inflation was at its highest, while giving the BBC the funding it needed to deliver on its remit.

Under the terms of the settlement, the licence fee must now increase annually in line with the consumer prices index, with the first increase due in April 2024. The Government are committed to supporting families as much as possible during these difficult times. We recognise that bill rises are never welcome and family budgets remain under pressure.

Today, I am announcing that we will use the annual rate of CPI in September to calculate the increase of the BBC licence fee in April 2024. This is the same way the Government calculate inflation-linked increases to state pensions and benefits. The decision means next year's licence fee increase will be kept as low as possible. In April, the licence fee will rise by 6.7%, to £169.50 annually. That will minimise the rise for households, keeping it to £10.50 over the year, or 88p per month, rather than a rise of £14.50 that would have happened under the previous CPI measure.

While we recognise that household budgets remain under pressure, the decision, alongside the two-year freeze, will save individual licence fee payers over £37 by the end of 2024. These interventions support households, while providing the BBC with £3.8 billion to produce its world-leading content. The Government engaged with both the BBC and S4C to understand the impacts on the finances of both broadcasters. The decision will ensure that S4C, which is also funded from the licence fee, can maintain its unique role in promoting the Welsh language and supporting our public service broadcasting landscape.

Although we have taken steps to ensure that the uplift is kept as low as possible, we recognise that a £10.50 increase will still be felt by licence fee payers. The number of licence fee payers is also declining, with an increasingly competitive media landscape. We need to make sure that the cost of the BBC does not rise exponentially, and that it is not borne by a smaller number of fee payers. We are already seeing an increasing number of households choosing not to hold a TV licence. The number of households holding TV licences fell by 400,000 last year, and has declined by around 1.7 million since 2017-18. That is placing increasing pressure on the BBC's licence fee income.

We are also seeing a rapidly changing media landscape, with more ways for audiences to watch content. The reach and viewing of broadcast TV fell significantly in 2022, with weekly reach falling from 83% in 2021 to 79% in 2022. As this trend continues, linking the TV

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licence to watching live TV will become increasingly anachronistic, as audience viewing habits continue to move to digital and on-demand media.

We know that if we want the BBC to succeed, we cannot freeze its income, but at the same time we cannot ask households to pay more to support the BBC indefinitely. We are already supporting the BBC to realise commercial opportunities that will make it more financially sustainable, and will continue to explore them provisionally with the BBC.

The situation clearly shows the need to consider the BBC's funding arrangements to make sure they are fair for the public and sustainable for the BBC. Therefore, I am also announcing that today the Government are launching a review of the BBC's funding model. The review will look at how we can ensure the funding model is fair for the public, sustainable for the long term, and supports the BBC's vital role in growing our creative industries.

The review will be led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and supported by an expert panel. It will assess a range of options for funding the BBC. We are clear that we want the BBC to succeed. The review will include looking at how the BBC can increase its commercial revenues to reduce the burden on licence fee payers. Given pressure on household incomes, I can explicitly rule out this review looking at creating any new taxes. The findings of the review will support the Government to make an informed choice on whether to consult the public on moving to alternative funding models. That would take place as part of the charter review process, in which any final decision on reforming the BBC's funding model would be taken.

The BBC is a great national institution. We want to ensure that it is fit for the present and whatever the future holds, while keeping costs down for the public. That means ensuring that the BBC is supported by a funding model that is fair to audiences, supports the creative industries, and is sustainable in the age of digital and on-demand media. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.30 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Working people listening to the Secretary of State's pitiful comments on support with the cost of living are not fooled. They see exactly what this is. We have had weak, mealy-mouthed platitudes that will make no material difference to their lives.

Thirty-three pence a month per household is what I understand to be the difference between today's announcement and the deal the Government had already agreed to. That is not nothing, but does the Secretary of State really think that it will even touch the sides? Are she and the Prime Minister so out of touch that they think that will get people through the Tory cost of living crisis? They crashed the economy, sending mortgages and rents sky-high. They hiked taxes on working people. They have presided over 13 years of stagnant economic growth.

What is the cost of the Government's announcement? The creative industries are one of the best sources of economic growth and quality jobs in the country, and the BBC is the biggest commissioner of work in the creative industries. Has the Secretary of State worked out the impact that choosing that particular inflationary measure will have on economic growth and jobs? Has she worked out the effect that it will have on the other creative businesses the BBC commissions and their supply chains? Has she worked out what difference it will make to the BBC's crucial role as our soft-power superpower, promoting brand Britain around the world? Has she worked out what the impact will be on democracy, given the BBC's role as the most trusted source of news anywhere in the world?

When it comes to the funding model review, I understand that the terms of reference are overtly focused on the commercial side of the BBC. I did not hear a word about the public service element of the BBC. The Secretary of State mentions an expert panel. Can she tell us who will be on it? What timetable will it work to? Where will the public service element feature in the Government's terms of reference? Have the Government actually given up on the BBC as a public service broadcaster?

I am afraid to say that it all sounds like yet more broken Tory promises. This is no way to treat one of our great institutions, and no way to treat the millions of people who work at the BBC, their partners and the people around the country who value them so much. Let us not forget that this comes on the back of a two-year freeze that has already had a damaging impact.

This is just the latest sign of chaotic decision making by a flailing, failing Government led by a Prime Minister who is too weak to control his own party and by Ministers who make working people pay for their mistakes. It is a sign of the disdain that the Tories have for the role that there have been 12 Secretaries of State for DCMS in 13 years; it tops the reshuffle charts, bringing instability to a Department for economic growth.

Our great institutions, our public services and working people just cannot take any more of this chaos. Labour backs the BBC. We will grow our creative industries and spread the benefits across the country. A general election cannot come a moment too soon.

Lucy Frazer: I think the shadow Secretary of State needs to live in the real world like the rest of us. People are struggling with the cost of living, and the Government have continued to take steps to protect them. She needs to live in the real world, in which the media landscape is changing. It is totally inappropriate just to sit still and do nothing, because that would destroy the BBC and make it unable to live in this changing world, and it would do nothing to protect licence fee payers. If that is the Labour plan, I do not want see it.

The shadow Secretary of State talked about what we are doing for working families. She knows that this is not the only step that we are taking. We have spent £97 billion supporting families across the country, saving a typical family about £3,300, and cut inflation by half.

The hon. Lady mentions the creative industries. She might have forgotten that since I have been in this role, I have used tax reliefs to support the creative industries. The Labour party voted against that. In fact, the

Conservative party has brought in tax reliefs for the creative industries year on year for 10 years, and they were voted down by the Opposition on every single occasion.

Labour does not support the creative industries. The shadow Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), said that we should be spending more money in schools not on the creative industries, but on others. Under this Conservative Government, the creative industries are growing at double the rate of the rest of the economy and employing 2 million people.

I will happily update the shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on other details relating to the panel. The timetable is that the report will come into play, to me, by the autumn of 2024.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): At the risk of correcting the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), I think the Housing Minister has changed more often than the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

I say to my right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State that I do not think that anyone will go to the stake for the difference between the September CPI and others, although we can note that, were the BBC licence fee to go up by another 10%, it would still be 50p a week per household, which is probably the best value in broadcasting anywhere.

I am worried that the Government have decided, again, to make a decision without consulting Parliament. If we are to have a public broadcaster funded by a licence fee or some equivalent, Parliament should be brought in more often by Governments. This is probably the fourth time that there has been an announcement of what will happen without Parliament having been consulted first. I hope that my right hon. and learned Friend and others will say that Parliament should be brought in. If the choice is between the United States model and public broadcasting, Parliament ought to be able make its views known.

The House will have noticed that the Secretary of State said that the review will look at alternative options for funding the BBC and then said that she “can...rule out...creating any new taxes.”

I thought that it was Parliament that decides whether we have taxes. The review may want to consider some kind of household payment, whatever we call it—at present it is called the licence fee; if we do not call it a tax, we call it a charge or something else—or something to be taken from existing taxation. If the BBC is a public benefit, why not add to whatever households pay for the licence fee the implied tax on the income that they use to pay it, for example? That would allow the income from existing taxes to go up.

The BBC needs defenders, and I am one of them. As long as I am here, the Government can expect detailed attention, and a great deal of support for doing sensible things.

Lucy Frazer: I, too, am a defender of the BBC. It provides an outstanding service across the world. I am proud to have seen at first hand the fantastic job that it did for Eurovision, for the coronation and for the last

night of the Proms. If we were to create something that spread our values and soft power abroad, we could not do better than creating the BBC. I certainly do not want to see its services diminished, but I want to ensure that it continues to survive in this changing media world. At the moment, it is losing audiences and licence fee payers, and I want to help to support it. That is one thing that we will look at carefully in the review.

The Father of the House rightly mentions the importance of discussion and consultation. My door is open to all those who want to raise points with me. Of course, in due course, we will need to consult, and this is part of the charter review, which will involve a wider consultation exercise.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The Conservatives agreed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation, but their own economic mismanagement means more misery for UK citizens. The Government are now desperately trying to wriggle on how they calculate inflation for the purposes of this agreement. There is a pattern among those on the Government Benches that they will breach an agreement, convention or protocol whenever it suits them. Let the Conservatives take responsibility for this BBC uplift, as the need for the rise is entirely due to their mismanagement of the economy.

We all have some criticisms of the BBC. Sometimes they are centred on its domestic news coverage, but the BBC goes far beyond that, extending to drama, radio, documentaries, Gaelic broadcasting and sports coverage. To those who would ding doon the public service broadcasters, I say: be very careful what you wish for. Of course, for many Tories the ideal would be GB News 24 hours a day, with Tory MPs talking to Tory MPs about Tory policies. I believe it is known as “GBeebies”, as one Tory MP after another is wheeled in to rant culture war tosh at the camera, in a pale imitation of American shock jocks. It is a breach of Ofcom rules. Democracy needs tough journalism and MPs scrutinised in long-format interviews by objective journalists.

We have seen what the cuts lead to. The BBC agreed, most foolishly, to take responsibility for over-75s’ licences, under the previous director general, Tony Hall. That has led to cuts in news, most recently at “Newsnight”, which I was once proud to serve as a reporter. The BBC opposed the Government’s reneging on their agreement on that at the time, and we have seen the results.

In the years to come, the BBC may need a different funding format, but that time is not now. In closing, may I ask the Secretary of State, on behalf of my colleagues on the Select Committee, to explain why the news of the new BBC chair was leaked to the press, rather than being given directly to Committee members or the Committee Chair?

Lucy Frazer: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s points. He mentioned many important parts of the BBC and other outlets. I am in favour of plurality of the media, so that we get a wide variety of voices. Of course, the preferred candidate as chair been announced and they will be going before his Committee in due course.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One important aspect of public service broadcasting is regional news. We have already experienced cuts to BBC local radio, but regional news programmes, such as the Lincolnshire and Yorkshire edition of “Look North”, which serves my constituency, are greatly valued by my constituents. Will my right hon. and learned Friend give an assurance that the BBC will continue with the current level of regional news broadcasts?

Lucy Frazer: The BBC is, of course, operationally independent and it is not for the Government to say what it should provide. However, I remind my hon. Friend and the House that the BBC is there to provide a public service and it has a public purpose: to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the UK. The BBC must also support the creative economy across the UK. Of course regional and local news and other output is an important part of that.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): May I ask the Secretary of State to get real? I am secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, and it has other members here. She knows that as sure as night follows day there will be the loss of journalistic jobs as a result of this cut, at a key time, when we are going into a general election and they are desperately needed. Why does she not admit that this is a revenge attack for all those times at 10-past 8 on the BBC’s “Today” programme when Ministers, having been asked questions by Nick Robinson, Mishal Husain, Justin Webb, Amol Rajan or Martha Kearney, have floundered to answer a basic, straight question? The review is an overlying threat to the BBC about its behaviour in holding this Government to account.

Lucy Frazer: I do not accept anything that the right hon. Gentleman has just said. The purpose of the review is to ensure that the BBC can continue to provide its exceptional and outstanding service for decades to come. If we just sit on our hands and do nothing, it will be overtaken by other media outlets that are competing in the world. We need to ensure that the BBC has a sustainable financial platform from which to provide its outstanding service.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): I have always loved the BBC. As a kid growing up and since, I have been blown away by the quality of its broadcasting; by its sport, music, culture, radio, nature, news and, of course, humour—even though I feel we have lost something with this endless thirst for political correctness. However, I have been increasingly concerned in recent months by the political bias creeping in, notably with individual commentary from presenters, through tweets and with inaccuracies in reporting. The BBC is a public service broadcaster; it is not a political organisation. So does the Secretary of State agree that the BBC has much more to do here to fully justify its publicly funded licence fee?

Lucy Frazer: The heart of my hon. Friend’s question is about the BBC’s impartiality. I know that the BBC strives hard to maintain impartiality, with its 10-point plan, but at its heart the BBC needs to provide an impartial service, because if it does not do so, it should not be getting licence fee payers’ money and it is just the

same as every other organisation. That is why it needs to continue to strive, as I know it does, to ensure that it provides impartial output.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): We should put on the record how lucky we are to have this public service broadcaster. We have just had a statement from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office about Russian interference in our democracy, where this House raised its concerns ahead of the possible election, which will perhaps come sooner rather than later. How does the Secretary of State think that doing this and cutting the BBC’s budget by £90 million is going to help resilience in the whole of society in an election year, when we know that misinformation and disinformation by malign states has never been more of a threat?

Lucy Frazer: I wish to correct the hon. Lady: we are not cutting the BBC’s budget but increasing it, by 6.7%. What we are not doing is increasing it by 9%. She will know from speaking to companies or households in her constituency whether those companies have had a 9% increase in their funding. Have the Government had a 9% increase in their funding? We are creating a careful balance to ensure that we support the BBC with this rise of 6.7% to provide those services, while thinking carefully about the cost of living and bills for households up and down the country.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her statement on restricting the increase in the BBC licence fee. I also recognise the reassurance she has given S4C, which is facing a particularly challenging time and needs stability. As she said, the licence fee still raises £3.8 billion. Departments, local authorities and most public organisations have to publish details and invoices in respect of sums in excess of £500. I have tried on two occasions in the House to introduce legislation to force the BBC to do the same. Within the review, will she consider how we can increase transparency and scrutiny of the £3.8 billion that is spent, so that we can introduce better efficiency gains and scrutinise closely where money might be wasted?

Lucy Frazer: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I do not think it will form part of this review, but it is an interesting point that I will reflect on and consider further.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I wish to declare that I, too, am an officer of the NUJ parliamentary group—in fact, I am its co-chair. May I point out to the Minister the damaging impact of dramatic cuts already being implemented by the BBC management, including to the valued BBC local radio services, which we have discussed in this House on several occasions, to highly regarded investigative journalist jobs, most notably and recently on “Newsnight”, and to local news output? Given that inflation has been substantially higher than expected during the two-year licence fee freeze and given, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) said from the Front Bench, that the BBC is the biggest commissioner of the creative industries in the UK, will the Minister, in her review of the funding model, please ensure that the BBC has enough funding to maintain the highest quality in commissioning, production and broadcasting?

Lucy Frazer: I am absolutely committed to ensuring that our creative industries continue to thrive and have set a very high ambition in that space. As I have said, I want to see the creative industries grow by £50 billion and have a million extra jobs by 2030. We are already seeing that growth, with the creative industries growing at twice the rate of the rest of the economy. I have helped ensure that the creative industries get tax relief. In June they had further funding of £70 million, which will leverage further private investment. There was an announcement in the recent autumn statement about further support for visual effects through the tax system. I am absolutely backing the creative industries. I want them to thrive and we are putting in place mechanisms to ensure that they survive. The BBC is part of that and is one of the things that I will take into account.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I welcome the statement from my right hon. and learned Friend. What further steps is she taking to encourage the BBC to maximise its commercial revenue in order to minimise the burden on licence fee payers?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I want to see a thriving BBC that can compete internationally and is getting further income. There are lots of opportunities for the BBC to explore, and I want to work with it very closely on those and understand them in greater detail. Whether that means international work and international charging or partnerships and joint venues, I want to make sure that the BBC has every opportunity to maximise its commercial income.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I have always been a staunch defender of the BBC, not least because my late parents met when they both worked for the corporation, so I would not be here otherwise. However, the increasing challenges for news coverage and the bias that has crept in have been of concern to my constituents. I wrote to the director-general following the broadcasting of Hamas propaganda on the attacks on the Gaza hospital. That was left up on the BBC website literally all day, creating community tensions in my constituency. There was not a word of apology, not a retraction and not even a reply from the director-general. As we approach this review, can we make sure that built into it is the requirement for absolute impartiality and fact-checking of news before it is posted?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes a really important point: because the BBC is so respected throughout the world, and because it has a reputation for providing impartial and accurate news, when it gets it wrong—in this case, it did get it wrong and it has admitted, now, that it did—the impact of that is more significant than when any other news outlet gets it wrong. Particularly on issues such as the one that my hon. Friend mentions, where there are consequences of inaccurate reporting both in the region and here, including for the Jewish community at home and the antisemitism that results from that, it is so important that the BBC takes time to reflect and makes sure that when it puts its news out, it is accurate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for providing clarity. I am sure that she is well aware of my feelings about BBC

reporting, which seems to be driven to a certain leaning and by an agenda that I have issues with—others have mentioned that as well. However, some of the programming is targeted at small and specific audiences, such as the Ulster Scots—I am very proud to be an Ulster Scot and I seek more Ulster Scots programmes on the BBC regionally—or the heritage programmes, which are always beautifully done. How will the Secretary of State ensure that the tightening that is done relates to paying presenters exorbitant wages, as opposed to cutting the niche programming that is necessary for the preservation of culture and heritage, which I love?

Lucy Frazer: I thank the hon. Member for his important question. I must emphasise that the BBC is operationally independent. It has a duty to provide diverse news and cultural programmes that are particular and relevant to the regions, and it must fulfil that duty under the terms of the charter and its public service mission. The decisions about who the BBC employs and what it pays is a matter for it, but it has obligations relating to transparency.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and particularly the review of whether the BBC is being fair to taxpayers. I have to say, constituents in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea do not consider that they get value for money from the licence fee, and nor do they think that £3.8 billion is a good amount for the licence fee. Many have written to me to express profound concerns about the BBC's coverage of the horrendous conflict between Israel and Hamas. This was about not just the BBC's failure to talk about Hamas as an internationally proscribed terrorist organisation, but their genuine belief that BBC bias is stoking anti-Israel sentiment in our country, which, as I am sure the Secretary of State will agree, is very concerning. So will the review cover three points, as well as all the others: first, the impartiality of content; secondly, whether the licence fee should be mandatory any longer; and thirdly, the need to decriminalise non-payment of the licence fee?

Lucy Frazer: I understand my hon. Friend's concerns about the language that the BBC has chosen to use in relation to Hamas. I have made clear my views—they are public on this issue—and I have stated on the record and raised with the BBC privately that Hamas is a terrorist organisation both legally and factually, and that it is important to call them what they are. As for her constituents' concerns, all of us, of course, get comments from our constituents, and that is an excellent avenue for people to pursue. However, I remind her constituents and others that there are also formal channels through which they can make their views known, if they feel strongly that they should pursue those matters. We are looking at impartiality in the mid-term review, which we will publish shortly. Like her, I am also concerned about the prosecution of people and I have said that I will look at that in the charter review.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the funding model review. It is the responsible thing to do given the changing media landscape that my right hon. and learned Friend mentioned. However, my constituents will raise an eyebrow at the BBC's prices going up this year to deliver less, with the BBC having closed the Oxford newsroom and made severe

[Greg Smith]

cuts to Three Counties Radio. Will she lock into the review a mechanism so that if the licence fee is to remain compulsory for those wishing to have a television, there has to be a consumer test to properly monitor what viewers actually want to watch and listen to?

Lucy Frazer: As always, my hon. Friend makes some interesting points. As we look at the licence fee review and the funding review, it is really important that we consider all aspects very carefully. The BBC is there to provide a great service to the public, and that is what the public expect.

BILL PRESENTED

SAFETY OF RWANDA
(ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary James Cleverly, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Oliver Dowden and Michael Tomlinson, presented a Bill to make provision about the removal of certain migrants to the Republic of Rwanda.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 11 December, and to be printed (Bill 38) with explanatory notes (Bill 38-EN).

Backbench Business

Tackling Islamophobia

12.59 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling Islamophobia.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this general debate on tackling Islamophobia. I also thank the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, and particularly its co-chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow), for their continued work to push this debate and for their ongoing efforts to tackle Islamophobia. It must be noted, however, that Members of this House have, over several years, repeatedly requested that Government time be granted to debate such a pertinent issue, but those calls have fallen on deaf ears. The Minister will no doubt tell us that the Government take this issue seriously. Oh, the gaslighting.

I assure all those listening to this debate, who might not really understand the issue, that when Muslim communities speak up on the issue of Islamophobia, we are not looking for preferential treatment. In fact, quite the opposite. We are asking for equal treatment, free of discrimination, injustice and hatred.

In the US, the Biden Administration have formed an inter-agency working group to counter rising levels of Islamophobia. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has appointed the first ever special representative on combating Islamophobia to advise the federal Government. The United Nations designated 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, following the General Assembly's acceptance of a resolution proposed by the 60 Muslim member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. And yet, despite all this—despite the US, Canada, the UN, 60 Muslim nations around the world and almost every mainstream Muslim organisation in the UK, and Muslims more generally, defining the experience as Islamophobic—our Government refuse even to call it Islamophobia. Internationally, Governments are standing up to this dangerous, insidious threat to our communities but, here in the UK, this Government are shamefully still playing with semantics.

According to the latest statistics, there has been a 600% rise in Islamophobic incidents here in the UK, including both verbal and physical abuse as well as vandalism, such as the dumping of a pig's head at a proposed mosque in the market town of Barnoldswick. That is not all that is happening when it comes to Islamophobia. The recorded incidents are just a snapshot of a picture that is much uglier than any stats can paint. Make no mistake, Islamophobia is an entire industry.

The reality is that Islamophobia has become an acceptable prejudice. In fact, you can openly spout Islamophobia and nobody, neither politicians nor journalists, will even bat an eyelid. Sadly, almost no one will speak up or challenge it. In fact, you can be a former adviser to a Prime Minister and the current Conservative parliamentary candidate for West Suffolk and advocate for special laws just to deal with Muslims, including: creating a register of imams and mosques; closing down mosques, Muslim charities and Muslim

TV stations; and banning the burqa and the hijab in schools. You can call for a whole legal structure to deal with those Muslims, as if they are a specific problem. And guess what? You can continue to be a Conservative party member and prospective parliamentary candidate without any consequences.

You can suggest that Muslim culture is inherently in “the grip of a death cult that sacralises bloodshed”

and a week later, without any apology, be invited on to platforms such as “Question Time” as a key guest. You can also say that Muslims “are not like us” and are a “nation within a nation”, sowing the seeds of division and hate without ever retracting those statements, never mind apologising for the hurt they have caused to communities. And guess what? You can get a regular slot as a presenter on a mainstream news channel.

You can even be an open Islamophobe like Douglas Murray, who calls for conditions for Muslims in Europe to be made harder across the board, and be platformed by *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Jewish Chronicle*, and—wait for this one—even be defended at the Dispatch Box by the then Home Secretary.

On the one hand, under the banner of free speech, you can say pretty much anything about Muslims and Islam and still occupy a mainstream space. On the other hand, when thousands of people use their democratic right to protest and raise their voice to call for a ceasefire in Gaza and to support the Palestinian cause, they are labelled as “hate marchers” and “terrorist sympathisers.” Even the Prime Minister joined the former Home Secretary in aiding that dog-whistle politics.

This is no surprise to British Muslims, because we all know that this Government have made Islamophobia the central piece in their manufactured culture war to deflect from their incompetence and their failure to govern this nation. As the saying goes, the proof is in the pudding. Only in the last hour we have heard the shocking revelation from the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), who is a former Minister and a former vice-chair of the Conservative party, that the PM has “written off” engagement with Muslim communities and does not take Islamophobia as seriously as other forms of racism. He has gone further by saying that the Prime Minister is paying “lip service” to tackling hatred against Muslims.

Despite everything that British Muslims are facing, I cannot remember the last time a Prime Minister or a Home Secretary visited a mosque to show a gesture of support to British Muslim communities. The failure to support British Muslim communities at a time when they are worried about attacks, and at a time when the Government’s own hate crime reporting centre has seen a 600% rise in attacks, shows that the problem goes right to the heart of Government. Not only Labour MPs are saying that; Conservative MPs are concerned, too. The hypocrisy and the disparity in behaviour from the Government stinks.

British Muslim communities want a level playing field so that they are equally part of modern Britain, of building our economy, building our NHS, building our businesses and entrepreneurship, and building Britain to be the best nation in the world. British Muslims know and understand that if Britain succeeds, they and their families succeed. I want people across society to understand that when all communities, including British Muslims, succeed, Britain succeeds—we all succeed.

The success we should have is hindered by the racism faced by Muslim communities across Britain today. Nobody is asking for exceptional treatment. They are simply asking for parity. If the Government can allow other communities to define the prejudice and hatred that impact them, why can they not allow British Muslim communities to define Islamophobia? If the Government can engage with mainstream organisations from other communities, why do they pursue a policy of non-engagement with mainstream Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain?

If, at a time when antisemitism is on a sharp rise, the Chancellor can rightfully announce an extra £7 million of funding in the autumn statement to tackle it, why, at a time when Islamophobia is also rising, did he refuse to announce a single penny of extra support for British Muslim communities in the same statement? If the Government can have a working independent adviser on antisemitism, why, three and a half years after the announcement of an independent adviser on Islamophobia, have they been unable to appoint one or to take the role forward? I hope the Minister is making notes, because I expect a response to every single one of these disparities.

Where I come from, you cannot be a bit pregnant—you are either pregnant or you are not. You are either on the side of equality or you are not. In the same vein, you either stand up for human rights or you do not. The problem for this Government is that they choose when they want to be pregnant. They never actually see the pregnancy through to full term, which is why they have never given birth to a serious policy, let alone nurtured a policy to drive a change that helps Britain to reach its full potential as a country.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will allow me to indulge my curiosity, I am eager to know, four years after announcing an adviser, announcing a working definition of Islamophobia and announcing that they take anti-Muslim hatred so seriously, what progress the Government have actually made in responding to the urgency they insisted upon. Moreover, what does the Minister understand Islamophobia to be? I would be happy to give way to her if she would like to explain—that deafening silence allows Islamophobia, in all its pernicious forms, to thrive.

According to Home Office statistics, hate crimes targeting Muslims rose by 25% last year, making Muslims the most targeted religious group. Almost half of religiously motivated attacks were against Muslims, a trend that has stayed consistent for the last six years. Every year these statistics are released, and every year there is zero action taken by the Government. What is worse is refusing to call out Islamophobia. Sticking to the term “anti-Muslim hatred” recognises the consequences once an attack, assault or physical or verbal abuse has taken place, but it denies Islamophobia, so nothing is ever done to treat the cause. Instead, we respond only to the symptoms. This means that we recognise the murder of 81-year-old Mushin Ahmed from Rotherham, but we do nothing to challenge the radicalisation that influenced his killers, who called him a “groomer”, stamped on his head and beat that innocent grandfather to death as he returned from his early-morning prayers. It means that, on the one hand, we call out his murder and that, on the other hand, we allow mainstream voices, including those of many in this House and some who were previously in government, to perpetuate far-right conspiracies about Muslim grooming gangs, contradicting evidence from the Home Office’s own inquiry.

[Naz Shah]

People do not just wake up and decide to commit acts of terror against Muslims. They do not just attack a mosque one day to commit criminal damage. They do not just randomly pull someone's hijab or whack a hijab-wearing Muslim woman over the head because they are violent people. They do these things because they are radicalised by Islamophobic conspiracies that go unchallenged.

In the same manner, this issue is not just about hate; it is about the prejudice and racism faced by British Muslims. A newspaper investigation has shown that if someone simply changes their name to Mohammed from John Smith, while keeping all the other details the same, their car insurance could cost them another £1,000. Other research has shown that CVs with Muslim-sounding names are three times less likely to result in an interview.

We see the same disparities across the board in healthcare, business and society. These acts of prejudice and clearcut racism are not necessarily acts of hate, but the unwillingness to accept Islamophobia and the willingness to accept only anti-Muslim hate mean that no one is able to understand those disparities or to challenge that injustice. How can we define something we do not even understand?

That is why members of the Muslim community are not surprised by the alarming rise of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes. They see the everyday micro-aggressions throughout society. They see how people can say things on the media about Muslims, and how they can fuel hatred against them in a way that no one would accept with any other community, but still maintain the cloak of respectability in mainstream spaces.

Many people now fear for their children's future in Britain, and those who can afford to do so are leaving. Some of the brightest, most intelligent minds, including our best doctors, engineers, bankers and traders, who can help to rebuild Britain, transform our economy and support our NHS, and who love Britain and are British, are looking to resettlement due to fears of what will happen as things get worse.

That is why I say to the Government that Muslim communities are not asking for special treatment. They simply see the Government's own recorded statistics on attacks against Muslims rising each year. They see their Government's inaction and unwillingness to take control. They see, on the one hand, how things are becoming worse and, on the other hand, how they are being patronised and gaslit by a Government who will not even call Islamophobia what it is.

The Government's inaction has directly or indirectly allowed Islamophobia to become institutionalised, embedded and even normalised across society. In China, there are Uyghur Muslims in concentration camps being forced to eat pork and drink alcohol, while Muslim women are being forced to marry non-Muslim men. In Myanmar, we have seen the genocidal campaign to wipe out Rohingya Muslim communities, with more than 25,000 killed and almost 1 million refugees fleeing to Cox's Bazar. In Modi's India, with extremist groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, we see an environment ripe for pogroms against Muslims. At this moment, we are witnessing collective punishment being endured by the people of Gaza. With the horrors of Srebrenica in living memory, the road map of inaction and growing far-right narratives, it is all too clear to Muslim communities where we could be heading.

My warning to the Government is that, if we do not act now, Muslims in this country might also face a Christchurch-style terrorist attack. The recent election of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands should worry us. Fringe, extreme views enter the mainstream when they are left unchecked. We can tackle this rising tide of hate only when good people speak up, when we become upstanders and not bystanders, and when we agree and openly believe that Muslims also matter.

If Governments such as mine can call out the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in China and can implement sanctions, how can they be so silent or offer only empty words when international law is brazenly and openly ignored by an ally nation? True justice takes brave conversations, because it means speaking truth to power, whether it is to a friend or anybody else.

For that reason, I recently accompanied my local dean, Andy Bowerman from Bradford cathedral, on a visit to Jaranwala in Pakistan with Islamic Relief—a Muslim charity for which I am an ambassador. I met Christian communities and provided them with aid and support following the religious persecution they have faced. As a Muslim of Pakistan/Kashmiri heritage, I felt it was my duty to support these minority communities facing persecution. Among the many stories I heard, the one that struck me the most was about how their Muslim neighbours stood between them and their attackers as their lives were put in danger—an act of bravery, courage and solidarity. I mention that because people do not expect everyone to fix their problems, but one thing that does give them hope in the darkest of days is the real sense of solidarity they receive from others who stand with them. Let us stand together and challenge all injustice equally.

My ask to the Minister is simple: will she today announce any new solutions and policies that the Government will act on to help tackle Islamophobia? The debate on the APPG definition of Islamophobia is over. Islamophobia has been defined. That boat sailed five years ago. When will the Minister and the Government adopt the definition?

Three and a half years ago, at the same time as they announced an adviser on antisemitism, the Government announced an adviser on Islamophobia. Three and a half years later, there is rightly still an adviser on antisemitism, so why are the Government not taking seriously, and recruiting somebody for, the role of Islamophobia adviser? Given the rising levels of Islamophobia across society—this is much like what we saw with the announcements in the autumn statement—what new funding will the Minister announce to enable us to tackle deep-rooted Islamophobia?

There are good colleagues here on both sides of the Chamber, and from all parties, calling out Islamophobia and the Government's failures. If the Minister does not provide answers and solutions today but prefers to use her time at the Dispatch Box to further gaslight British Muslim communities, that will once again signal to them that the Government will do nothing to challenge the Islamophobia they face and will signal to wider society that there is a hierarchy in racism. Although inaction may mean nothing to the Government, the danger of not acting would, sadly, be felt by British Muslims. Taking no decision is also a decision.

1.16 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Before I start my remarks, I direct Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial interests. I also pay

tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe), who was supposed to co-sponsor the debate. We work closely together on this issue, and I pay tribute to her and her constituents. She has a large and vibrant Muslim community—a community she cares deeply about. As in many constituencies up and down the country, communities in Hyndburn are particularly concerned about the impact of the conflict in Gaza, which has seen a rise in Islamophobia, but which is, above all, taking an awful toll on innocent civilians. I know that my hon. Friend is making, and will continue to make, every effort to represent her constituents on that issue at this challenging time.

Last month was Islamophobia Awareness Month. I spoke to an audience at an event organised in my constituency by the Joint Mosques Council, and I pay tribute to Abdul Choudhury, its chair, for putting on that event. I also pay tribute to the Muslim Council of Peterborough, which is chaired by Mohammad Ayub Choudry. At that event, I told a story, which I will tell again. In the summer of 2019, in the run-up to the by-election, where I came a stunning third, I was knocking on doors and I knocked on the door of a gentleman called Amir Suleman. He said to me, “Paul, I want to know your view on the all-party parliamentary group definition of Islamophobia.” I looked at him rather blankly; I did not know what to say—I did not have much to say at all. I vaguely knew that the issue was being discussed, but I had no in-depth knowledge about it, and I felt ashamed. I was seeking to represent thousands and thousands of Muslim constituents, and I knew nothing about the APPG definition that he had contributed to and that mattered so much to many members of the community and to the constituents I sought to represent.

What did I do about it? I promised Amir there and then that I would further my knowledge and become involved in the APPG, should I win the election. Following two or three rather embarrassing interviews on Salaam Radio, and having become the Member of Parliament for Peterborough, I am proud to stand with the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) as the co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims. Amir Suleman challenged me, and he was right to do so. He is my friend, and I am proud to represent him.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), the APPG definition is solid and sound, and the Government should adopt it. They did decide to produce their own working definition, but they are still without an adviser to replace the one who, sadly, was removed from that position, and they seem to have got themselves into a difficult situation. They do not seem to know what to do about this, and I hope the Minister will tell me what she is going to do about it, but let me suggest a solution: they should adopt the APPG definition, which they could have done many years ago. We do not have to go through this any more. The APPG definition has been adopted by many different people and organisations, and if the Government adopted it, their problems would be solved instantly.

However, I do not want to talk only about negative aspects of the Muslim community. I want to talk about some positive aspects, because Peterborough would not be Peterborough without that community. I am proud of some of the APPG’s reports since I have been involved in it, because they show not just the challenges faced by Muslims but the contribution that their

communities make to this country. I am proud of the fact that Muslims contribute £31 billion to the UK economy, and anyone who visits Peterborough will find the signs of that are not hard to see. Some of the wealthiest people in Peterborough are Muslims. They are entrepreneurs, they set up businesses, and they have done fantastically well in contributing to Peterborough’s economy. When it comes to charitable giving and going the extra mile, the Muslim community do that in spades. I do not know for certain, but I would bet a dinner at one of the top restaurants in Peterborough that the time when the largest amount is raised for charity in my city is Ramadan. Millions of pounds are raised and go to good causes. That is just one example of the contribution that Muslims make, not just in Peterborough but throughout the country. One of the APPG’s reports, “Faith as the Fourth Emergency Service”, draws attention to that charitable contribution to good causes in the UK.

The contribution of this community has never been seen more clearly than during the covid pandemic. We have many different communities in Peterborough, and many different faiths. We believe different things, we speak different languages, and we come from different parts of the world. However, when it came to supporting one another and supporting the vulnerable, we in Peterborough came together as one city. That showed what a contribution Muslim communities, and others, can make when the country is facing an emergency.

Many Members, including the hon. Member for Bradford West today, have talked about the challenges that Muslims have faced—insidious and often silent forms of Islamophobia involving, for instance, car insurance and being asked to pay more for services. I see this all the time in Peterborough. A friend of mine, a Muslim Conservative councillor, often changes his name to an English-sounding one when trying to buy a house in order to get a foot in the door, but when he goes to view the house, he is told, “Actually, it has already been sold.” That has happened to him on a number of occasions, and it is an example of everyday Islamophobia. We cannot turn a blind eye to it; we must call it out when we see it, and we see it all too often.

In preparation for the debate, I asked my constituents—through my Facebook page, whose followers are 11,000-strong—to tell me about their experiences of Islamophobia. Let me read out a few of their responses. The first is from Kaoru Miyake, who wrote:

“Islamophobia comes from ignorance, stereo type and fear of unknown. Ordinary Muslims have no connection to Hamas, ISIS or other terrorist groups.”

All too often, she suggested, it was assumed that they did have such a connection, and I fear that she is right. Suzette Weston, who, obviously, is not a Muslim, wrote:

“It is easier for ignorant people to call all Muslims terrorists than to take the time to understand a vast majority are just loving family people.”

I entirely agree with her. Ahmed, another constituent, wrote:

“There must be a strong campaign to unite and educate the public on the issues of islamophobia and anti-Semitism, and how the conflicts we are seeing today”

arise from ignorance. I could not have put it better myself. These are ordinary people, and I often find that if I ask ordinary people in my constituency for their views, they respond in their droves with common-sense observations.

[Paul Bristow]

Let me, for a moment, talk in my capacity as a Conservative MP. When I campaign in my constituency—when I knock on doors and speak to constituents—I find that the values of Muslims are values that I share, as a Conservative. They are entrepreneurs; they believe in low tax, in family values and in strong communities. If we were able to talk about international issues in an empathetic and understanding way, if we were able to understand what the death or persecution of a Muslim means, anywhere in the world—whether it happens next door, or in Kashmir, Gaza or Myanmar—we could lead the Muslim community in this country. If we could do that, my party would probably receive many more votes from a community that has sometimes been seen, shamelessly, as a vote bank for the Labour party. If we were able to get our language right, we would reap the rewards.

Having talked about international situations, I now want to talk briefly about the ongoing conflict in Gaza. We have seen an increase in antisemitism, obviously, but also an increase in Islamophobia as a result of that conflict. The revulsion that ordinary Muslims in places such as Peterborough feel about the deaths of innocent people in Gaza, and about the people who are suffering collective punishment for the crimes of Hamas—people who have done nothing wrong, but are seeing their homes being destroyed and bombs landing on their homes and in their communities—cannot be overstated. Thousands, undoubtedly, have died, and many buildings have been destroyed. I struggle to understand how any of this makes Israel any safer.

We need a permanent ceasefire in Gaza. I wrote to the Prime Minister about this some time ago, and my feelings are exactly the same now. We gave peace a chance when we had a temporary truce. More than 80 hostages were released, and the bombings stopped. We need to give peace a chance permanently.

1.28 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am grateful to the all-party parliamentary group for British Muslims for reminding me before the debate that mine is the constituency with the 77th largest number of Muslims. They constitute about 13.5% of the population there—about 16,000 people. To put that in context, the Muslim population in my constituency is itself hugely diverse and has communities from Africa, Asia, the middle east and indeed from Europe. That is within a constituency where almost half the total population was born outside the UK. It is a very liberal and very tolerant constituency, and I have always been extremely proud to represent it and to live there in the heart of the community.

Unfortunately, however, even in normal times there are significant numbers of hate crimes. I am shocked that, nationally, 44% of all hate crimes are committed against Muslims. I am shocked that 42% of mosques have experienced some form of attack over the last three years. We have had incidents where women going about their ordinary business have had their headscarves pulled off and been abused. There is a great deal of what one might call casual—though by no means trivial—racism where, in the context of the neighbourly disputes that we all deal with as MPs, people's religion is brought up, often from a position of entire ignorance. I am struck

by the fact that quite a lot of non-Muslims are also subject to Islamophobic abuse, presumably on the grounds of their ethnicity.

Complacency is the enemy here; we need to educate people as much as we can, but we also need to punish people, and I am sure that all hon. Members present are working with their local police on tackling Islamophobia and hate crime. It is also the case that Muslim communities, who often are disproportionately in poor housing, suffering from poverty and other forms of injustice and living in overcrowded and damp conditions, are neglected and do not get their fair share of resources.

One particular type of discrimination is the lack of prayer space and community space. For many Muslim communities, the mosque is not just a place of prayer and worship, but an educational, social and cultural hub. Particularly in areas such as London, where land and property are hugely expensive, that is made very difficult. We live in straitened times but, through the lottery and other money, there is potential to provide that. However, increasingly I see Muslim communities not having the resources that they should have and being discriminated against in that way.

If that is the position in normal times, unfortunately the times we live in are worse than that because of the international situation. I will not go into detail, because the matter will be subject to the courts in due course, but an individual was arrested about 10 days ago for a series of attacks, over a period of a month or so, on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses in west London. I have visited the major local mosques in my constituency, in White City and Shepherd's Bush, and I am pleased to say that they have not been victims, but Acton mosque and other mosques in the area have suffered repeated and regular attacks to their premises.

In addition—this is of particular concern to me—the Palestinian mission was attacked on a number of occasions. Death threats were issued and there were attacks on property owned by the mission staff. I am very proud to have the Palestinian mission in Hammersmith, but there is an irony here that, because of the failure to recognise Palestine as a state, the mission lacks diplomatic status. Everybody refers to Dr Husam Zomlot, whom many of us know as the fantastic representative of Palestine in the UK, as “the ambassador”, and to the mission as “the embassy”, but it has been brought home to me very significantly that that is not the case.

I have written several times to the commander responsible for diplomatic protection, asking that diplomatic protection be granted to the mission, particularly at this difficult time and particularly when it has suffered a series—not one, but a series—of criminal damage attacks. I have not had a response to those letters. I know that my right hon. Friends the shadow Home Secretary and the shadow Foreign Secretary have also written to their counterparts raising those concerns, so they have been raised at the most senior level. It is frankly outrageous, when tensions are running so high and when any embassy of any other country would receive full diplomatic protection, that that is not being granted. The Palestinian mission represents all Palestinians irrespective of religion, but there is undoubtedly an Islamophobic element in the flavour of the attacks that have taken place.

I have said that the enemy here is complacency. We must take Islamophobia seriously. We must at all times be aware that its impact on our community is significant

in people's everyday lives. That is equally true of anti-semitism and other forms of hatred based on race, religion and other protected characteristics; it is an insidious and a growing part of our society, but it is disproportionately affecting Muslim communities. Even in the most liberal and tolerant parts of our community, that is a feature that we must resist. I hope that the Minister responds to this debate not just with warm words but with action, funding and a real determination to take Islamophobia seriously, because it is a constant and ever-present threat within many of our communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I am not going to put a time limit on speeches, but, looking at the clock and given that 10 colleagues wish to speak in addition to the Front Benchers, I think it would be helpful and a courtesy to others if speeches were confined to around eight minutes, bearing in mind that there is another debate to follow this one.

1.36 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I speak in this debate from a number of different perspectives, but before I commence I want to pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place.

From 2019 to 2020, I was the United Kingdom Prime Minister's special envoy for international freedom of religion or belief for all. I advocated and engaged with people from all across Parliament in an inclusive manner to ensure that the UK stood by and stood up for international freedom of religion or belief for all. That meant taking forward the Bishop of Truro's report as a top priority for the Foreign Office and the Prime Minister at that time.

That report meant the UK ensuring that we stood up for international freedom of religion and belief for all faiths. During my time in office, working with the United States, we set up a 27-member international alliance of states working together to advance international freedom of religion or belief for all. We then signed off on the UK hosting an international summit on international freedom of religion or belief. During covid-19, we saw the real challenge of people around the world being targeted for their faith or belief. There was a real increase in antisemitism, in Islamophobia and in anti-Christian hatred, and we saw that across the board. I referred to that in the Westminster Hall debate when I stepped down from that role in 2020.

Having advocated, as a former UK special envoy, for international freedom of religion or belief all around the world being a top priority of the United Kingdom Government, for other countries around the world doing the right thing and for ensuring that people are treated fairly and equally, I then have to ask myself what the situation is in the UK regarding intolerance and hatred towards faith communities across the board. This debate is about Islamophobia, which some term anti-Muslim hatred.

Tell MAMA, an organisation funded by the Government, says that its latest figures demonstrate a sevenfold increase in incidents of anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia. According to independent Home Office figures on the faith communities that receive the largest amount of

hate, in 2022-23, 44% of incidents were against the Muslim community, and 19% were against the Jewish community. In 2020-21, 45% of incidents were against the Muslim community, and 22% were against the Jewish community. In 2019-20, 50% of incidents of faith-based hate and intolerance were against the Muslim community, and 19% were against the Jewish community. Year after year, those two faith communities have experienced the largest amount of hate and intolerance. That is unacceptable. According to the Community Security Trust, intolerance, hatred and antisemitism against the Jewish community is exceptionally high. That is unacceptable.

Policymakers and Governments must act to challenge intolerance and hate against all faith communities in a fair and inclusive manner. That is why, at Prime Minister's questions last week, I asked the Prime Minister about the unacceptable rise in intolerance and hate against two faith communities. In the autumn statement, the Government announced £7 million in funding to tackle antisemitism, and they were absolutely right to do that. They also provided £3 million in October after the horrific, barbaric terrorist act in Israel, carried out by the terrorist organisation Hamas. The impact of that on antisemitism in the UK was shocking, and the Government's response was right and proper. I hope the Minister can answer my question, because the Prime Minister has not, nor has he spoken to me since I raised it with him: why was there no funding to tackle anti-Muslim hatred in the autumn statement?

I spoke to the Prime Minister in his office during the leadership contest about engaging with the Muslim community in an inclusive manner across the board, knowing the different challenges. He said that he was committed to that, and that we would work together on it. I am waiting to see the Prime Minister to this day. I have been a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister, an envoy and an MP; when I give my word, I honour it. If someone cannot honour their word, they should not give it, in any area of life.

The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) raised an interesting point about the question I asked the Prime Minister: why do the Government not have an independent adviser on Islamophobia? Why has that role been left vacant for more than a year? A 2019 *Guardian* article that I have here reports that, in one of her last acts as Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) appointed John Mann to the Government post of independent adviser on antisemitism. As a former British envoy for religious freedom, I worked with him in the other place. He does a terrific job. My right hon. Friend also appointed Qari Asim as the independent adviser on Islamophobia. He was in office for one year. He told me that he was never given any terms of reference by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. He was removed from office in 2022, and there has been no action to appoint another independent adviser.

I pay tribute to our former adviser on Islamophobia. I have here a document that reads:

"Faith leaders write a prayer for Holocaust Memorial Day 2020".

The faith leaders were His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi and Imam Qari Asim. He was good enough to write that prayer and to work with faith leaders, and we must acknowledge his work. There may have been a difference in policy with the Government, but an independent adviser should advise independently.

Naz Shah: The hon. Member is making an interesting point. Does he accept that the yardstick applied to things that Muslims say is different? Islamophobia has become an acceptable, respectable form of racism across society, and it has been emboldened by people who do not challenge it. Is it not true that Qari Asim was measured with a different yardstick?

Rehman Chishti: Qari Asim worked with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Chief Rabbi and all faith leaders, and he did a terrific job in that regard. When we are dealing with independent advisers, we must respect their advice. They look at things from a faith perspective and they may sometimes express disagreement, but that is the role of an independent adviser.

When the Government want to remove someone from office, there is something called courtesy and decency. I have here the letter sacking Qari Asim, and it is not even signed by a Minister. It just says, “You’re no longer required, because your views are not compliant with freedom of expression.” I thought the whole thing about freedom of expression and respect was difference of opinion; freedom of expression means that people can engage in peaceful protest when they do not agree with a certain course of action. The Government need to look at that carefully.

I ask the Minister to answer the question that the Prime Minister did not: why have the Government not appointed an independent adviser on Islamophobia? Will they appoint one so that we have parity with the independent adviser on antisemitism? When will that decision be made?

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech on this important subject. He spoke about Qari Asim, an excellent imam, whom I know. Should our conclusion not be that the Government never had any intention of doing anything with him?

Rehman Chishti: I have been a Member of Parliament for 13 years, and I resigned from Government when Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, was not given sanctuary in the UK as she should have been. Our Government did not offer it. I was the British trade envoy to Pakistan and I advocated for justice for her there, which she got, but she needed a country to step up and take her in. Canada did; we did not, and I resigned from the Government because we did not do the right thing. I come from a Muslim background; my father and grandfather were imams. It was the right thing to do to stand up for someone being persecuted.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) asked whether the Government really intended for Qari Asim to do some work. For 13 years I have tried to engage with the Government, and with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, who make the decisions. The Prime Minister says that it is about action, not words. He needs to explain why action has not been taken; otherwise, people may infer, as the hon. Member said, that the Prime Minister is not genuinely engaged on this matter, nor does he want to engage, because what he says is not followed by substance. If the Government were committed to engaging with the independent adviser Qari Asim, why did they not give him terms of reference for two years? I pay tribute to his work and to that of John Mann in the other place, who does a terrific job on antisemitism.

Ours is a great country because we have people from all faiths and backgrounds coming together to make it so, and contributing at every level. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) does a fantastic job championing his constituents and engaging with the Muslim community. He highlighted their economic contribution of more than £31 billion to our way of life—is that right?

Paul Bristow: Yes.

Rehman Chishti: I thank my hon. Friend for clarifying that point. We have people like Mo Ali in cricket; across the board, in enterprise and sport, Muslims contribute at every level. Our population in the UK is around 4 million, or 6% of the total population. Having a strong, cohesive society is not just morally right; it is in our national security interests. When we have a Government favouring one faith community and not another, it leads to divisions and divisiveness, which we do not want.

The Minister may want to look at the Prime Minister’s Twitter page, which lists an Eid event on 3 May and an engagement on Eid Mubarak with the Muslim community. There is nothing else on the Prime Minister’s page about tackling anti-Muslim hatred, but there are 21 mentions of tackling antisemitism, even though antisemitism and Islamophobia are both unacceptable. If someone looks at the Government’s action from the outside, they will see that there is no independent adviser for anti-Muslim hatred and no comparable funding to tackle it, which creates negative perceptions of the Prime Minister and his Ministers.

In the autumn statement, the Treasury gave £7 million to deal with antisemitism. Did the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities ask for money from the Treasury to deal with anti-Muslim hatred? If the Department did not ask for money, I do not think we cannot blame the Chancellor, so the Department has to answer the question.

I have another question for the Minister, and I hope the Prime Minister will read it in *Hansard*. The Prime Minister says that the Government have given Tell MAMA £6 million since its inception in 2012 to deal with anti-Muslim hatred. We have seen the stats that show that such incidents are increasing and increasing. The Minister may say that the Government’s funding is for protected places of worship—I think that was the answer given by the Treasury. In the Home Office statistics, there is a category for protected places of worship, which covers mosques, temples, gurdwaras and others across the board, but there is no data on how much money has been given. The Government say, “Up to x amount is available.” Okay, but how much of it has actually been given?

I will end with this. As a former Foreign Office Minister, I can tell the House that people across the world look around and say, “The UK advocates for international freedom of religion or belief for all”—we got a lot done during my time in office, working with the US on getting members of the Baha’i community released from the Houthis in Yemen, and helping people in Uzbekistan who had been persecuted for their faith—“but how do you address anti-Muslim hatred in the UK, with the resources and structures that you use to deal with other forms of hatred?” I think the Government will find it a real challenge to answer that. We see the foreign policy issues in places such as the middle east.

People say, “Your perspective on how international law is applied in the middle east may explain how you are dealing with the situation back home with regard to faith communities and anti-Muslim hatred.” When we ask people to apply international law in Ukraine, they will probably ask us to apply international law when it comes to the middle east.

That is why we have the whole dilemma in UK foreign policy about getting more people from the non-aligned states to join us. They want a consistent approach across the board internationally. Back home in the UK, we need to make sure that we treat all faith communities fairly and equally, with the same resources and structures. At the moment, I am not seeing that in engagement with the Muslim community.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Let me try again. If every colleague takes 15 minutes, the following debate will have to be cancelled. I urge a self-denying ordinance.

1.54 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): As I have raised in this House multiple times, I have received Islamophobic abuse since being elected. For example, just this week I posted on social media a video of my comments about migrant survivors of domestic abuse during the debate on the Victims and Prisoners Bill. I will not read the worst responses I received, which contain swearing, but here are some of the others:

“You was given a job in England UK to help England, all you care about is your own, feel free to leave at any point. What about all the immigrants raping our children you deluded fool.”

“Ban all Muslim MPs. They represent Muslims not the native. Their Loyalty is to their own.”

“This is not Islamabad!”

“Deport.”

“You are a traitor and will be prosecuted in 2028.”

“If England doesn’t kick you and every other ungrateful foreign beggar out very soon there will be no England anymore.”

“You’ll be much happier in a Muslim country Begum.”

“People like you should be expelled from parliament. The only people you represent are foreign nationals.”

“That’s the problem with Islam. Women are treated as second class by the men. You need to recognise the truth about this primitive religion.”

“Muslims don’t have beautiful clothes, only ugly headscarves! There is no invention, only destruction!”

I want to make it clear to the House that those are just examples of the regular, almost daily abuse that I have had to learn to cope with, and they are from just my most recent social media post. I also receive threats online, via voicemail and email, and by letter. The situation is escalating, exacerbated by those trying to capitalise on current events by spreading their hate and division, and I now face a heightened and very serious risk to my safety.

It is important to recognise that what I am experiencing as the first hijab-wearing MP reflects a growing current within society. The data shows that Muslims are the largest target of religiously motivated hate crimes. Following the 7 October Hamas attacks, which resulted in around 1,200 Israeli deaths, including those of civilians and children, and the subsequent Israeli military assault, which has killed more than 20,000 Palestinians, including

civilians and children, hate crime against both Jews and Muslims has risen dramatically in Europe. In the UK, Tell MAMA has reported a 600% increase in attacks on Muslims, including attacks and hostility against individuals and mosques, with children targeted at school, death threats and physical attacks.

Islamophobic hate crimes not only affect the victim but send reverberations through communities, as they reinforce established patterns of bias, prejudice and discrimination. Islam and Muslims have increasingly been seen as culturally dangerous and threatening to the British way of life. We are constantly scapegoated and misrepresented, and labelled both deviant and evil. Being called a supporter of terrorism or a terrorist, or being held responsible as a group for terrorism, is a common theme. The reality is that Islamophobia is widespread and relates to whole structures of discrimination. The socioeconomic discrimination and inequality that Muslims face makes us the most economically disadvantaged faith group in the UK.

At the same time, Muslims face institutional discrimination. For some time it has been widely understood, including by the United Nations, that approaches to counter-terrorism are modelled on Islamophobic stereotypes, policies and political structures, but Government documents leaked in November 2023 revealed that officials had drawn up controversial proposals to broaden the definition of extremism even further, to include organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain—yet this Government will not even recognise Islamophobia. When Muslims are the target of hate, the Government are silent. They allow social media to perpetuate narratives of terrorism about Muslims, while failing to call out those who misrepresent and generalise about Muslims. More than that, they recklessly stoke the hate by peddling their so-called culture wars against the British people, pandering to a culture that tells people it is acceptable to discriminate against, to persecute and to abuse Muslims.

Across Europe, the situation is alarming, with the threat of the far right on the rise, including the re-emergence of far-right parties and politicians such as Geert Wilders. Whether in India, France, China or Iran, I believe it should be up to women to choose what they wear. No state and no man should have the right to overrule that. This September marked a year since the murder of Mahsa Amini in Iran. When she was murdered, the Prime Minister was right to describe the Iranian regime’s attacks on women protesting for their right to not wear the hijab as abhorrent, but the Government are silent about the outlawing of Muslim women’s right to wear the abaya in France. And where is the Government’s outrage at the fact that government offices across Europe can now ban employees from wearing religious symbols such as headscarves in the interests of so-called neutrality, after a court was asked to rule on the case of a Muslim employee in Belgium who was told that she could not wear a headscarf at work? I am concerned and alarmed by that, because it could exacerbate the marginalisation of Muslims at a time when Islamophobia is already on the rise.

The constituency that I represent has a long and proud history of migration and anti-racism, whether that was our Jewish communities and allies opposing fascists at the battle of Cable Street in 1936 or our Bangladeshi communities leading the anti-fascist mobilisation in 1978 after the murder of Altab Ali. We are one of the most culturally diverse areas in the UK,

[Apsana Begum]

and we are damned proud of it. We will always stand together, multiracial, of all faiths and none, against division and intolerance.

2 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I welcome the debate on behalf of the 3 million Muslims in the United Kingdom and the significant number who are my constituents in Hendon. Since 7 October, there have been many incidents of racism following the terrorist attacks in Israel. Subsequently, the number of antisemitic incidents has risen to more than 1,009; the same would probably be true of attacks within the Muslim community.

I receive regular reports from the Metropolitan police about hate crimes taking place in the borough of Barnet, and I am extremely concerned to read that many are linked to the current conflict in Israel and Gaza. On Brent Street in Hendon, there is a fast food restaurant called Lahore, which a constituent told me had been vandalised; he attributed the attack to Islamophobia. I do not know whether that is true, but I do know that a Jewish restaurant in Golders Green was also attacked, and the police refused to categorise that incident as antisemitic. Regardless of who attacked either of them or why, the business owners were left with a financial bill as a result of those extremist actions.

I believe that Islamophobia exists in this country, as indeed does antisemitism, but I do not accept that it is accepted and embedded in the United Kingdom's society. The debate has been posited as a conflict between one group of people in the United Kingdom and those who hold a different religion. That appears to frame the discussion as an otherness of those who are Islamic, but I do not see that, particularly not in my constituency. In fact, there are significant shared concerns between my different communities. For example, Muslims and Jews both share beliefs around halal and shechita, and issues with the coroner service—I have campaigned long and hard on seeking a death certificate within 24 hours. The promotion of faith schools is important to both communities, as are single-sex spaces in places such as hospitals.

People in the United Kingdom sometimes do denigrate Muslims because they perceive them as a homogenous entity, but that is far from the truth. It is interesting that no one has so far raised the great schism in Islam: that of the Sunni and Shi'a divide. Put simply, the contention centres on the succession of the Prophet Muhammad and whether his grandson or one of his followers should be considered to be next in the line of succession. That has been the cause of conflict for hundreds of years and is the basis of proxy conflicts happening right now in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and other parts of Africa. As a non-Muslim, it is not for me to say how the line of succession should occur or to dictate whether one strand of Islam is more legitimate than another, but it is incumbent on me to acknowledge the differences and, as a democratically elected representative, to give voice to the minority and defend their right to exist.

In recent years, the divide has been attributed as a justification for sectarian violence. In Iraq, Daesh committed atrocities against Yazidi men and women and used extremist ideology to justify their crimes by calling their victims devil worshippers. In Syria, the Druze community

has faced persistent attacks, which has led to opposing clans coming together in a common cause against their Syrian attackers. The conflict in Syria has also fed into existential fears among Lebanon's Druze community, in part due to attacks on the Syrian Jews and Alawites, who are denounced as non-Muslims and targeted for extreme violence.

We have heard today about Muslims suffering discrimination and violence in Bosnia, Myanmar and China. Those are all examples of Islamic atrocities overseas. However, the murder in 2016 of Asad Shah in Scotland exposed not just Islamophobia but a downright hatred of Ahmadi Muslims here in the United Kingdom. The murderer, a Sunni Muslim, had driven from Bradford with the intent of confronting Mr Shah because he was an open adherent of the Ahmadiyya branch of Islam, which believes that the Prophet Mohammed was not the final Muslim prophet. The judge said that Mr Shah was regarded by those who knew him as

"a peaceful and peace-loving...family man who went out of his way to show respect for those of any faith."

She said that his murder was

"an appalling display of merciless violence",

and told the murderer that he was responsible for the

"barbaric, premeditated and wholly unjustified killing of a much-loved man who was a pillar of the local community."

As has been mentioned about other murders, Mr Shah, too, was repeatedly stabbed and had his face stamped on.

The Muslim Council of Britain put out a statement after the murder of Mr Shah, which stated that it affirmed "the right of Ahmadis to their freedom of belief"

and rejected attacks upon them. But the MCB stated that its theological position is "fundamentally opposed" to the Ahmadi community, and that no Muslim

"should be forced to class Ahmadis as Muslims if they do not wish to do so".

I thought that would be anathema to many hon. Members in the Chamber, and particularly those who advocate self-identification in other spheres of life. Is it not right for the individual to decide what religion they identify with, and for that person to be allowed a view, even if it is not shared by others? As is attributed to Voltaire,

"I may not agree with what you say, but I defend...your right to say it."

Article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

That is where I see a difference between British Muslims and those from around the world. The clue is in the name—British. Unlike in some cultures, the issue of British values supersedes other prejudices. Our shared belief in common values surrounding decency, fair play, respect for the law and free speech are also shared by British Muslims. When I visit faith schools in my constituency, such as Barnet Hill Academy in west Hendon, I see those values being instilled in the children alongside their Muslim faith. All of us must ensure that that continues.

The United Kingdom can lead by example. In July 2021, the UN expressed its deep concern about the lack of attention to the serious human rights violations

perpetrated against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community around the world and called on the international community to step up efforts to bring an end to the ongoing persecution of Ahmadi Muslims. That has included discriminatory legislative and policy frameworks; the targeting of Ahmadi Muslims through exclusion, hate campaigns and violence, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, verbal and physical attacks in the public sphere, and attacks against their cultural sites and places of worship. Ahmadi women are particularly affected as they face harassment and discrimination due to their distinctive traditional attire, which makes them immediately recognisable, while Ahmadi children and youth are often denied admission to schools and higher educational institutions because of their faith. They also constantly suffer intimidation and bullying, forcing them to interrupt or drop out of their studies. Reports also indicate that Ahmadis are still portrayed in a negative light in school textbooks, while Ahmadiyya educational institutions are often seized and administratively closed by state authorities.

It is my belief that tackling Islamophobia is not restricted to non-Muslims and Muslims.

Naz Shah: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way and associate myself with his comments about ensuring that we end all persecution of all Muslim communities, whether that be the Ahmadiyya community or the Shi'a community. For declaration purposes, my family and I come from the lineage of the Prophet, sallallahu alaihi wasallam—peace be upon him. Many in my family are of Shi'a heritage and belief, and many are Sunni. I am struggling to understand the idea here. We were talking about Islamophobia, but the debate has been taken elsewhere. I do not think that that was the intention of the hon. Member, who is making valid points about persecution, but does he not agree that the intersection of Muslim-upon-Muslim hatred is not Islamophobia in the context of what this afternoon's debate is about? I encourage him to speak to people—perhaps we could have a chat; I would not mind a coffee—just to unpick some of that, because it does worry me.

Dr Offord: Perhaps we should have a kahwa instead of a coffee. The hon. Member hits on a really good point, but I see Islamophobia and antisemitism—I hope that I made this clear—as simply racism. There can still be inter-faith racism, where one sect says that another is not legitimate. That is still the denigration of a particular community. For me, that is still Islamophobia and racism, and it is unacceptable, but I am grateful to her for her comments, and for accepting the premise of my argument.

To conclude, if Islamophobia, racism or whatever we want to call it is to be addressed, all Muslims must be prepared to demonstrate a tolerance not only of other faiths but of their own. It is only then, through leading by example, that we can attack and address other causes of Islamophobia, which I have acknowledged exists, in this country as well as abroad, and take action against people who are denigrating others.

2.11 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for proposing today's important debate, and all my fellow members of the APPG on

British Muslims for their work. I also thank somebody from the other place: Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, the treasurer of the APPG, for her constant work, and for holding up a mirror to us all, but particularly to her own party, and for the courage and strength that she shows in doing that.

It is a privilege to listen to and take part in this emotive, powerful and timely debate. Islamophobia is a scourge on society. It is on all of us to tackle it, call it out, and educate. It is something close to my heart, and I declare my interest as the co-chair of the APPG on British Muslims. I firmly believe that it should not be left to British Muslims to tackle Islamophobia in this country. It is on all of us to build a fair, inclusive society, which we can all benefit from, and to highlight the huge contributions that Muslims make to our country.

I see those contributions in my constituency every single day, through inspirational charity work, public services and business. If anyone wants to see a great representation of how diversity is strength, I encourage people to look at the videos of Luton Town football club fans leaving Kenilworth Road in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), on news of our promotion to the premier league after the team's historic win, taking them to Wembley. They entered Bury Park to the sound of dhol drums, Irish bands and people of all faiths and none, and of all backgrounds and ages, celebrating together as one. Multiculturalism is alive and kicking in towns such as Luton. It is a strength to be the town of many voices that we are.

I have been fortunate to meet fantastic people from across the country living their faith through action, and I learn something new with every meeting. When I visited the British Muslim Heritage Centre in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), I learned that an invention by Muslims is the thing that gets me going and powered throughout the day: coffee, which is possibly the greatest invention, especially for any parent or shift worker. I would like to spend more time talking about the great work being done in Luton North by our Muslim community, whether it is through organisations such as Inspire Eid, Discover Islam, Curry Kitchen and Faiths United, or internationally through Islamic Relief and the Muslim Council of Britain. Unfortunately, hate crime is so rife that less time is now afforded to the wonderful contributions of Muslim communities in our country. Instead, we have to spend so much time talking about the horrific impacts of Islamophobia, as well as other forms of discrimination.

It comes as no surprise to anyone that racists do not stay in their lanes. Hatred rears its ugly head in the form of misogyny, homophobia, antisemitism, anti-black hatred as well as anti-disabled discrimination. In many instances, a perpetrator will not just limit their hatred to one protected characteristic. Often the victim will be picked out for more than one issue, facing a barrage of hatred for multiple parts of who they are. That is especially true for Muslim women, black Muslims and disabled Muslims. We have heard horrific examples of that from my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum), who is a dear friend, just for doing her job.

According to statistics from the Home Office, hate crimes targeting Muslims rose by 25% last year, making Muslims the most targeted religious group. Almost half of religious hate crimes are directed towards Muslims,

[Sarah Owen]

and with the atrocities taking place in the middle east we are seeing an even more horrific rise in Islamophobia. Tell MAMA reports an increase in recent incidents of Islamophobia in the UK of over 300%. That is concerning enough on its own, but it is only the tip of the iceberg, as the level of under-reporting and misreporting is likely to be considerable. That is why we desperately need the Government to adopt the cross-party definition of Islamophobia. That would be just a start in tackling the problem head on. How can the Government begin to tackle Islamophobia if they refuse to define what it is?

For years, we have heard that the Government would be looking into that. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) has pushed hard on it, as have others, yet we have heard nothing but silence—just more holding answers and delays as the incidence of Islamophobia continues to rise. That simply is not good enough, so will the Minister give assurances that an agreed definition of Islamophobia will be coming from the Government, and explain the real reason for the delays? I would also be grateful if she confirmed that the additional funding announced by the Chancellor in the autumn statement rightly to tackle the rise in antisemitism, as the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) raised, will be matched, or at least that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will fight for that, to tackle Islamophobia at the same rate?

While we wait, more people will be subjected to abuse, intimidation and violence without a standard that institutions and individuals are held to, and are accountable for. More than 15,746 attacks have been committed against Muslims since 2017. How many more must happen? How much more misery must be inflicted before the Government act? As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), an ardent campaigner against Islamophobia, has called for many times, when will the long-promised adviser on Islamophobia be announced and, importantly, worked with?

Let me turn to the intersectional aspects of Islamophobia, which is incredibly important, particularly for younger generations. We know the horrific impact and the rise in Islamophobic attacks following the description that the former Prime Minister and former Member for Uxbridge gave of veiled women as “letterboxes”. Research from Tell MAMA showed that Islamophobic incidents rose a shocking 375% the week after those comments from someone who clearly should have known better but sadly did not. Constituents in Luton North contacted me to share their anger and concern, which I shared, about the impact of the slurs against Pakistani men made by the former Home Secretary—or should I refer to her as another contender for the Tory leadership? Those slurs were founded not in evidence, but in fear-mongering and Islamophobia.

It is beholden on all of us in this place and in positions of power to lead by example, and to continue to learn, educate ourselves and challenge our own prejudices. Being anti-racist is something to consistently strive for. Many have a lot to learn still, especially when it comes to intersectionality and Islamophobia. Shokat Patel, a board member of Muslim Engagement and Development, reported:

“Lots of women say they are fearful of going out, just because of the fact they are wearing a headscarf. For those that wear a niqab they find it even more difficult because they know, almost certainly, that they are going to get verbal abuse.”

The visibility of Muslim women increases the chances of their being targeted for hatred. They experience the double whammy of misogyny and racism, often compounded when class is also factored in.

That discrimination creates barriers to talented, compassionate and experienced Muslim women in many walks of life, including in the workplace, accessing services—particularly important for Muslims with disabilities—representation in the media and, sadly, in politics, and in other forms of public life. We are all the worse off because we are missing out on the best and widest pool of talent. Representation matters, not just in politics but in every walk of life. The constant use of culture wars to stoke division and hatred by those in power, who should know better, is a dead end. It is detrimental to us all, especially those of us who want a fairer, safer and more inclusive society.

On the flipside, we can also see positive steps being taken internationally, leading to progress. This year, the United Nations held the first-ever International Day to Combat Islamophobia on 15 March 2023. That was after a resolution backed by 60 Muslim member states was passed by the UN General Assembly. The UN called on all UN member states to mark the day by recognising Islamophobia and working to combat it. Can the Minister tell us whether that was marked and recognised by the UK Government? If not, do they plan to do so next year?

The point I want to end on is that we can do better than this. If we are to build a safe, fair and inclusive country for all, we must do better, and that starts with the leadership of this country, and in particular the leadership of the Conservative Government, who have all too often been found wanting on the challenges of Islamophobia. Despite what some politicians and media outlets describe as “woke issues”, Islamophobia affects entire communities—our villages, towns and cities across the country and internationally. It is a poison that knows no boundaries.

We know that the world is an incredibly unstable and volatile place, especially for people of faith. The example of state-sanctioned Islamophobia that we see in Xinjiang against the Uyghurs is an affront to humanity. The reports of torture, imprisonment, killings and denial of people’s religion breaches multiple human rights laws, and it is genuinely welcome that the House is united in the condemnation of those atrocities. However, many residents in my constituency have contacted me, and I share their condemnation of senior members of the Netanyahu Government speaking about “flattening Gaza” or enacting “Gaza’s Nakba”. That is compounded by other dehumanising language, with Israel’s President claiming that there are no innocent civilians in Gaza.

When it comes to genocide, we look back at history. We even stand in this Chamber, and we utter the words, “Never again”, yet here we are, staring at it from afar, knowing that this tragedy is now the present for the Uyghurs and a real threat for the Palestinian people. If we are to avoid the further ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, I urge the Minister to speak directly to their colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to ensure that the UK backs the United Nations’

unprecedented calls to invoke article 99 of the UN charter for a ceasefire to protect civilian populations. We must ensure that we work as an international community and strain every sinew in the pursuit of peace, an urgent lasting ceasefire between Hamas and Israel, an end to the loss of innocent life and the freeing of hostages to ensure that the current atrocities being endured are no one else's future.

2.22 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen). I put on record my thanks to the hon. Members for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for securing this important debate. We have perhaps become accustomed in this place to debating Islamophobia abroad. We have become accustomed to talking about the Uyghur Muslims and Srebrenica, which was mentioned earlier. My concern, however, is that we have become negligent and too often overlook what is happening at home. Perhaps the time has come to look inward.

As my party's equality spokesperson, I am increasingly concerned by the Islamophobia we are seeing across the country and by the effects on my own community in Edinburgh West as their constituency MP. In Edinburgh West, we have a significant and vibrant Muslim community. We have a mosque in the Blackhall area, with which I am in regular contact. We have open days and surgeries. However, like many communities across the country, there is an underlying tension that is not acceptable.

A 2021 report from the Scottish Parliament cross-party group on tackling Islamophobia with Newcastle University showed that more than 80% of Muslims in Scotland who responded to the survey said that a family member had experienced Islamophobia. Some 78% of those same people thought it was getting worse. Some 75% of Muslims say that Islamophobia is a regular or everyday issue in Scottish society. As we have heard, Islamophobia is often gendered, with women being targeted for wearing a hijab or niqab.

For too long, we have seen Islamophobia as a problem that affects other places and other countries. As I say, it is time we looked closer to home. Yes, we must question the Government, but we all must also question ourselves. This debate comes at a crucial point in our cultural and social history in this country, as the horror of the war in Israel and Gaza is further heightening those tensions that I have mentioned. It is creating fear in Muslim and Jewish communities across the country.

In a recent meeting with Tell MAMA and a representative of the Community Security Trust, both groups expressed their concern about the damage being done to the relationships between their communities. They also outlined their fears about the abuse being suffered—significantly online but also in person. At that point, almost 300 Islamophobic incidents had been reported in the first 12 days after 7 October, which was a sixfold increase on the same period last year. Muslims are facing abuse and dehumanising slurs across society. That is not just unacceptable for Muslims to face; it is unacceptable for anyone in our society. I believe that we are all responsible for what happens, each and every one of us.

Afzal Khan: I thank the hon. Member for sharing with us all the statistics from Scotland. May I say how delighted I was to learn that every single political party

in Scotland has accepted the definition, including the Scottish Conservative party? Does she not agree that now it is time that this Parliament took through the motion with the support of all parties?

Christine Jardine: The hon. Member is absolutely right. It is time that not just all the Scottish parties but that all of us accepted the definition, took it through Parliament and made sure that it is recognised. I would not want to patronise the Muslim community, the Jewish community or any other community in this country by telling them that I understand what it is like to suffer the hatred that they suffer on a daily basis, but I like to think that I am aware of it, and I will do everything I can to support them in fighting it, because every community should feel safe. That is important to me as an individual.

I think it was the hon. Member for Bradford West who said the issue was not about giving priority to any community; it was about equality for all communities, and ensuring that every community feels safe and secure. I ask the House to consider that. If any Member feels insecure, they should think about how it can be addressed. If we feel secure—if we feel that we have never been the subject of hatred, or hatred towards our community—we should think, “What can we do to ensure that other communities and other individuals feel the same way?”

2.28 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I want briefly to raise a few points about my constituency. I have a multicultural constituency. It has been a migrant community for more than a hundred years, and there is a sizeable Muslim community. In fact, I helped establish the first mosque—the Islamic centre in the centre of Hayes—30 years ago. We rub together pretty well. At the weekend, we had an open day at the Islamic centre to talk about how the different religions work together. There was a particular discussion about the role of Jesus Christ, and I thought it was interesting and fascinating to hear people's views. Nevertheless, we do have problems.

Before 7 October, we had an arson attack on the Muslim women's centre in Yeading Lane in Hayes. For the women, the tragedy of it was that the arsonist burned through the room where the holy Koran was stored. The House can imagine the distress caused. I previously raised this issue with a Minister on the Floor of the House, and was given an assurance that there would be support. At the moment, we are seeking a meeting with civil servants to go through the details; any help the Minister could provide in arranging that meeting would be really helpful, because it is quite pressing. As the insurance money hopefully comes through to repair the building, we need the security put in place fairly rapidly.

Political parties have to be straight with one another on this issue. With regard to the Conservative party, Baroness Warsi has played an exceptional role—a heroic role. I cannot understand why the Human Rights Council did not carry out an investigation into the Conservative party when Baroness Warsi and others produced their report about the Islamophobia within that party, and I think it reflects badly on the HRC. I normally support the HRC—in fact, I have been on picket lines in support of its staff when there were staff cuts—but I think it needs to examine its behaviour that regard.

[John McDonnell]

Turning to the Labour party, we have to be straight—I know that at the moment in the Labour party, being straight can sometimes be dangerous. I want to raise a number of points. First, the Labour Muslim Network, which was founded a number of years ago, did an excellent job in researching and exposing Islamophobia within our own party. We need to listen to that. I cannot understand how three years on, the Labour Muslim Network is trying to establish itself as a formal affiliate to the Labour party, but still has not been allowed to affiliate.

Secondly, it is accurately reported that in my local area, for example, Ali Milani—who is one of the founders of the Labour Muslim Network, and was an excellent candidate for Uxbridge in the general election—was warned off standing again in the by-election. It was made clear that he would not be allowed to stand, which is unacceptable. I put on record that any party that allows the deselection of my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) is not protecting the Muslim community in the way I would expect it to. I want to send that message. I have raised these issues in private—I have written to the leader of the Labour party—and the reason I am now raising them in public is that I have not had a sufficiently positive response that addresses those issues.

The final point I want to make with regard to the Labour party is this: why is it that when someone is accused of Islamophobia and they apologise, disciplinary action is then ended and there is no issue with regard to the Whip or whatever, but in a number of instances where a person has been accused of antisemitism, the Whip is withdrawn and they spend months awaiting any form of investigatory process? In his inquiry into the Labour party, Martin Forde addressed the issue of a potential hierarchy of racism within our party, and I am afraid that the way in which we treat individuals reinforces that concern. We all condemn antisemitism and Islamophobia, but we have to treat all forms of racism with equivalence, as well as the individuals against whom allegations have been made. I think we have a job of work in our own political parties to ensure that we tackle Islamophobia effectively, in a way that will make us—particularly the Labour party—the anti-racist party that we have always wanted to be, and an example to other political parties.

Finally, I want to emphasise the point that the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) made: at every meeting I have in my constituency with regard to the Muslim community, I am so proud of the way that it that has come forward in a migrant community over the past 50 to 70 years and now plays such a significant role in my constituency, but also nationally. Whenever there is a problem—whenever there is an issue that I need support on and I put the call out—it is the Islamic centres and the mosques that come forward and provide the resources. In fact, the Islamic centre in Hayes was visited by the Prince and Princess of Wales only a few months ago, just to thank the people there for the work they have done in raising funds for Afghanistan and elsewhere. I put on record my thanks to the Muslim community and my gratitude for all the work they do, and my pride in being able to represent the Muslim community in my constituency.

2.34 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Islamophobia is an insidious kind of racism that is prevalent not just in British society but globally. Across the world, Islamophobia looks like the continued torture in concentration camps of Uyghur Muslims in China, the merciless killing of 51 worshippers in New Zealand, and the ongoing persecution of Rohingya Muslims at the hands of Myanmar's brutal regime.

I commend the UN for designating 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, and thank the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation for its effort. Recognising the existence of Islamophobia and how it plagues society is vital if we are to begin to tackle it. Canada and the European Commission have tasked key individuals with combating Islamophobia, and to mark Islamophobia Awareness Month, the US has announced that it will develop a national strategy to counter Islamophobia. Regrettably, we do not have the same leadership domestically, despite Islamophobia damaging public and political life in Britain. Most victims of religious hate crime in the UK are Muslims, and in October, Islamophobic incidents were up by 600%. A recent report found that 35% of British mosques experience a religiously motivated attack at least once a year.

Islamophobia is not just hate crime: it permeates every aspect of a Muslim's life. Muslims are more likely to live in poverty, they are the UK's least liked religious group, and most Muslims have experienced religion-based discrimination in their everyday life. All of that makes it harder for Muslims to live as equal members of British society. When I was first elected to this House, I swore my oath in English and Urdu—a language that Queen Victoria also proudly spoke. I was then subjected to a barrage of hate for daring to speak another language and for boldly expressing my Muslimness. There is a small, but increasingly vocal, minority in this country who hate the idea of a rich, pluralistic society that British Muslims contribute to. It is that minority that we all must stand up to, and to do so, we must have a clear, community-endorsed definition of Islamophobia.

In 2018, following extensive consultation with academics, experts and faith communities, the all-party group on British Muslims formulated a definition of Islamophobia. In the years since, every political party except the Conservatives has adopted that definition, alongside councils, elected Mayors, trade unions, academics and community groups across the country. However, there is one blocker to UK-wide adoption of a formal definition of Islamophobia: the Tory Government. They rejected the expert definition put forward by the APPG, claiming that it is inconsistent with the Equality Act 2010. To adopt that definition of Islamophobia at Government level would not be legally binding—it would be intended to serve as a workable measure for action against Islamophobia. No legislative change is being proposed, so the Equality Act would not be undermined. In reality, most acts that are deemed Islamophobic under the APPG's definition would also be considered religious discrimination under the Equality Act. The APPG's definition and the Equality Act complement each other—one does not challenge the other.

Given that the Government's argument against that definition does not stand up, and considering that they have abandoned all plans to develop their own definition, can the Minister outline why the Government still think

that the APPG's definition of Islamophobia breaches the Equality Act if it is not legally binding? I imagine that this Government are reluctant to adopt any definition of Islamophobia, because the longer we do not have one, the longer the Conservative party cannot be in breach of it for failing to deal with the widespread Islamophobia within its own ranks.

In the local elections earlier this year, three Conservative councillors were re-elected despite having previously been suspended for alleged Islamophobia and racism, with no information provided on why they were readmitted to the party and deemed fit for public office. If we are to begin to tackle Islamophobia in British society, we need strong leadership and a commitment from the very top to root out this dangerous hate. Other nations across the world are waking up to the threat that Islamophobia poses and are doing something about it, but not the UK. The longer the Tories stay in Government, the longer we will have no leadership and no action on Islamophobia. My constituents and British Muslims across the country deserve better.

2.40 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in today's debate, which was so brilliantly opened by my good and hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). As a Member of Parliament representing a significant Muslim community—some 30% of my constituency's population are Muslim—I understand just how important tackling Islamophobia is, and I am grateful for this debate.

We all in this place have a duty to ensure that the UK is a welcoming, tolerant place for all, irrespective of religion or belief. We must stand up to religious hatred in all its forms. I am proud of the rich contribution that Muslim communities make to the United Kingdom, but, sadly, we have people who seek to sow division by spreading racism and hatred. Islamophobia is far too prevalent in our society.

Following consultation with academics, lawyers, and Muslim organisations, the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims defined Islamophobia, saying that it is

“rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

Labour was proud to adopt the all-party group's definition in 2019. The Conservatives are the only major political party to continue to refuse to adopt that definition, even though the Scottish Conservatives have done so.

Identifying racism and knowing how to tackle it are of paramount importance. In 2022-23, around 44% of religious hate crimes recorded by police were Islamophobic. Muslims have formed the highest proportion of victims of religiously motivated hate crimes for each of the past five years, and we know that Muslim women often suffer greater discrimination and form the majority of victims of hate crime as a result of being more easily identified as Muslim.

As noted by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Community Security Trust and Tell MAMA, rising tensions in the middle east can lead to an increase in anti-Muslim and antisemitic incidents in the UK. We know that antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crime incidents have both increased. Tell MAMA reported a sevenfold increase in anti-Muslim incidents between 7 and 29 October compared with the same

period last year. We expect to see a robust response to all incidents of hate associated with the conflict. There is no place in Britain for Islamophobia, just as there is no place for antisemitism. We must not allow these tragic events to divide our communities.

In Luton, we have a history of opposing those seeking to sow division and spread racism. We recognise that our beautiful cultural fabric is made up of many voices, but we come together to speak as one town. That means diversity is our strength. We know that understanding each other is essential to creating a harmonious society and helps to tackle inaccurate fears used to underpin racist ideologies. Luton Council of Faiths works to establish, maintain and celebrate mutual respect, friendship and tolerance in Luton, including through our Luton in Harmony initiative over the past decade. Luton Council of Faiths comprises representatives from a wide range of religions, including Baha'i, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Quaker and Sikh among others. Open dialogue across our communities is so important to breaking down any bias and prejudice.

Luton has always been a welcoming town, with Muslim diasporas from across the world—whether that is from Europe, Asia or Africa. Many excellent local community events have helped to create this robust cohesion. During Ramadan, there is the Big Iftar in the town centre, where people from all our communities come to break their fast together, as well as the Unity Iftar at Madinah mosque on Oak Road, which is hosted by its neighbour Luton Town Football Club. Events such as these bring people together to understand the Muslim faith.

I am also proud that Luton Labour has developed and encouraged many Muslim members to get involved in democratic institutions by standing and getting elected as local councillors. I am pleased to say that Luton Labour group has not only a majority of women councillors, but, within that, a majority of Muslim women councillors, and I am proud to campaign alongside them every week. But I recognise that, sadly, they have been targeted for abuse, which is simply unacceptable.

I take this opportunity to give recognition to this year's civic mayor of Luton—my good friend Councillor Yaqub Hanif, who has been excellent at demonstrating that, to tackle division and discrimination, we must all focus on equality, inclusivity and tolerance.

I finish by saying once again how proud I am to represent Luton and our wonderfully diverse town. Our Muslim communities are integral to our town's identity, and I am their ally and, in the strongest possible terms, against anyone who seeks to spread Islamophobia. I ask the Minister again whether this Conservative Government will adopt the cross-party APPG's definition of Islamophobia, as the Labour party did in 2019, and if not, why not.

2.45 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I express my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for providing this platform for a debate of such importance. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) and others on having secured it.

Once again, I rise to speak in this Chamber to address a pervasive issue that continues to affect our society deeply: the distressing rise of Islamophobia. This matter

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

is significant not just to British Muslims, but to the very essence of what our country stands for. The Muslim community, especially in my Slough constituency, makes a huge and positive contribution to our economy and society. Today, though, I am here to voice my concerns and to challenge the Government's inaction and indifference towards Islamophobia.

The statistics show the stark reality for many Muslims in Great Britain. An alarming 44% of all religious hate crimes last year targeted Muslims. That highlights the fact that a significant portion of our society endure persistent discrimination and fear due to their faith—an issue on which I have campaigned tirelessly. Such statistics, and the ones provided by Tell MAMA and other respected organisations, should make us all very concerned, and they highlight the need for action.

The current Israel-Hamas conflict, marked by a grave humanitarian crisis with more than 15,000 deaths, has tragically fuelled a rise in both antisemitism and Islamophobia. The harrowing images of death and devastation broadcast globally underscore the profound indirect impact that such conflicts have on societal attitudes, exacerbating domestic prejudice and hate in the UK. This time of global distress should prompt a call for unity, not be a catalyst for further division and conflict. The world does not need more conflict, and we must urgently push for peace.

The Conservative Government's hesitation to formally define Islamophobia, despite widespread calls for them to do so, marks a significant failure. Their reluctance hinders our collective efforts to effectively confront and mitigate this hate crime. Notably, the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, which I have served as a vice-chair, has defined Islamophobia as a "form of racism" targeting manifestations of "Muslimness or perceived Muslimness". That definition is crucial in understanding and tackling the multifaceted nature of Islamophobia, and I have raised this issue on previous occasions in various meetings.

Sikhs have been targeted, taunted and even shot dead, as in the US, simply because of the way they looked, having been mistaken for Muslims because of their turban and beard. A hate-filled killer in Arizona, for example, shot to death a Sikh outside his petrol station. The attacker had reportedly declared that he wanted to "go out and shoot some towelheads".

This Government's failure to recognise and adopt that definition, despite all the other major and mainstream political parties having adopted it, implies that they are neglecting the complexity of Islamophobia, leaving its victims without the necessary protection and support. The Government's failure to define Islamophobia, coupled with divisive rhetoric and policies, especially concerning immigration and the invoking of culture wars, has fuelled an atmosphere in which Islamophobia and other forms of racism have flourished.

The Government's approach has been marked by language that alienates and vilifies specific groups, contributing to a climate of fear and misunderstanding. That was exemplified when the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, referred to women wearing a burqa as looking like "bank robbers" and "letterboxes", a statement that not only demeaned a religious practice, but inflamed anti-Muslim sentiment. Such racist remarks, especially

from a political leader, have a tangible impact, emboldening prejudicial attitudes against Muslim communities. They led to a huge spike in hate crimes against Muslim women, with some hate-consumed individuals throwing eggs and tomatoes at them. There is still no independent inquiry into Islamophobia in the Conservative party, despite the then Prime Minister and then Chancellor promising it on national television.

In my role as a Labour Member of Parliament and an elected representative of Slough, I am committed to opposing divisive tactics and to fostering a Britain that thrives on its diversity. We must envisage a nation that unites in its varied cultural and religious make-up, standing against any rhetoric that seeks to divide us based on race, religion or origin. For example, in Slough, a major multicultural hub, our strength lies in our diversity, and it is crucial to ensure that every community feels safe and respected. We aim to develop policies that promote integration and cohesion, addressing racism and discrimination proactively and reactively. Indeed, our nation's rich cultural and religious diversity is its core strength. Upholding and celebrating that diversity is vital to maintain Britain's standing as a beacon of pluralism and inclusion. By actively condemning the intolerant individuals who engage in racism and hate crime in all its forms, we commit to a society that values and respects every single individual.

The time for mere words has passed. We need a Government who not only acknowledge, but actively implement policies to combat Islamophobia. We have heard some excellent examples from right hon. and hon. Members today. It is crucial to address its root causes, foster understanding and create a society where hatred finds no sanctuary.

2.53 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): In a debate on Islamophobia in Parliament two years ago, I spoke up about my experience as a left-wing Muslim woman in the public eye. I spoke up about the barrage of hate I receive on a daily basis. I talked about being called a "cancer" and being told that my

"Muslim mob is a danger to humanity",

as well as about how people tell me to "go back" to my own country. That is a difficult claim to get my head around, I must admit, since I was born in Birmingham. I spoke about the worst effects of Islamophobia, and about how they are shaped in this very Chamber at that very Dispatch Box in policy and political decisions, from attacks on civil liberties at home to disastrous decisions to wage wars abroad. I would like to say that in the two years since, things have changed and people have listened, and that people take Islamophobia more seriously, but I cannot. If anything, things have got worse.

In recent weeks, as I have stood up for the rights of the Palestinian people, I have experienced a new wave of hate. Because I am a Muslim who supports the rights of the Palestinians, far-right trolls widely share claims that I am a Hamas supporter, repeating the allegations no matter how many times I condemn Hamas's killing of civilians. Because I am a Muslim, when I speak up about Palestinian children being indiscriminately slaughtered, people write to me telling me, "Keep your effing mouth shut, you Muslim bitch." And because I am a Muslim, when I called for a ceasefire and an end to the bloodshed—a view supported by 76% of the

British public, but not this House—someone wrote to me saying it was me who was “anti-democratic” and “anti-British”, and I was again told to “go home.”

I want to live in a country that looks after the poor and the vulnerable at home, and respects human rights and international law abroad, and where the NHS is fully funded, homes are not mouldy or unaffordable, everyone can go to university without having to worry about debt, and every single person can put food on the table and keep a roof above their head. But for some people, the colour of my skin and the religion I choose to follow mean I am beyond the pale. That is difficult to process, but what makes it harder is knowing that that racism does not come from a vacuum.

As I said in the debate two years ago, that hate is not innate or natural; it is taught from the very top by people in positions of power and privilege. For example, despite a Home Office report saying that most child sexual abuse gangs are made up of white men and there is no evidence that grooming gangs are disproportionately black or Asian, earlier this year the then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman), falsely said that grooming gangs were “almost all British-Pakistani”—a claim so strikingly wrong that even the press regulator called it out.

It is not just politicians fanning the flames of hate. Shortly after I gave my speech, the Muslim Council of Britain Centre for Media Monitoring published a report on the British media’s coverage of Muslims and Islam, analysing almost 48,000 articles and 5,500 broadcast clips. It paints a very disturbing picture of how Muslims are portrayed in the media. Articles antagonistic to Muslims were found to outnumber supportive articles by a ratio of seven to one. Islamophobic tropes were pervasive, with *The Spectator*, for example, asking “tough questions” such as

“can Muslims learn to put country before faith community?”

The report found that false anti-Muslim generalisations often go unchallenged on broadcast media. Recently, we have seen Islamophobia spouted by journalists, such as the newspaper editor who said that

“much of Muslim culture is in the grip of a death cult”.

With that steady drip-feeding of hate, it is little wonder that racists tell me I am not British. That is the message right-wing outlets publish, with dog whistles and sometimes even foghorns. But as I said, the worst effect of this hate is not abusive language, but policy and political decisions, and we see that today.

Earlier this year, a long-awaited review into the deeply controversial and widely discredited Prevent programme was published. The review was led by someone whose anti-Muslim views were already well-known and who had said, for example:

“Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future.”

That person had been hand-picked for the job by a Government led by a man who mocked Muslim women as “bank robbers” and “letterboxes”. It is little wonder that the review totally ignored the programme’s discriminatory impact and undermining of democratic freedoms.

Of course, Islamophobia is not confined to this country; we see dehumanisation at home and abroad. Even liberal British newspapers do not talk about Palestinian children, instead referring—I quote a recent article—to “Palestinians aged 18 and under”.

The Palestinian people as a whole are often depicted and treated as terrorists, deserving not of rights and self-determination, but of suppression or even elimination. In India, Prime Minister Modi has introduced discriminatory anti-Muslim legislation and anti-Muslim mob violence is becoming normalised. In China, shocking human rights abuses and the suppression of Uyghur Muslims are well documented.

In the US, we have seen horrifying attacks in recent weeks. The six-year-old Palestinian American Wadea al-Fayoume was killed after being stabbed 26 times, with his landlord charged with the boy’s murder, and three young Palestinians were gunned down in what is believed to be hate crime, for the apparent wrongdoing of speaking Arabic and wearing keffiyehs. Across Europe, the Islamophobic far right is on the rise, from the hate-filled and openly Islamophobic Geert Wilders in the Netherlands to Le Pen’s continued advance in France.

Much closer to home, as I discussed in the debate two years ago, I still have serious concerns about my party’s handling of Islamophobia. The Forde report into the Labour party, commissioned by the party’s national executive committee and carried out by the distinguished Martin Forde KC, published its final report in summer last year.

It found that:

“the Party was...operating a hierarchy of racism or of discrimination with other forms of racism and discrimination”—

such as Islamophobia and anti-black racism—

“being ignored.”

Martin Forde reiterated that view this year with a stark warning that still has not been listened to. That is why I, along with the Labour Muslim Network, have called for an independent inquiry into Islamophobia in the Labour party.

Today, both Islamophobia and antisemitism are rising sharply across Britain, but they are not disconnected struggles or competing concerns, as some people like to portray them. The far-right thugs who attack one group of us today will go for the other group tomorrow. The politicians who whip up hatred against migrants now will want other scapegoats in the future, and history tells us that Jewish people and Muslims are often at the top of their list. For me, the fight against Islamophobia and the fight against antisemitism are part of the same struggle: the fight to live in the world where everyone, no matter their race or religion, is able to live in dignity and freedom. I believe that we are made stronger not by not pitting our communities against each other, but by uniting our struggles and finding solidarity and safety.

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

3 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): May I start by thanking the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) for the way in which she led the debate? I do not think there was a single important part of this matter that she did not touch on extremely well.

I will pick up on one thing: the issue of definition—not the APPG definition, which I will come to, but the United Nations definition. The UN describes Islamophobia as: “a fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims,

[Stewart Hosie]

both in the online and offline world. Motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism, it targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim.”

That is a very technical description. I will come back to the evidence of what it means to Muslims in Scotland on a day-to-day basis, and then to the rather less technical definition.

To stay with the United Nations for a moment, the recent report by the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief found that suspicion, discrimination and outright hatred towards Muslims has risen to “epidemic proportions”. The UN says:

“Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and other...acts of terrorism purportedly carried out in the name of Islam, institutional suspicion of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim has escalated to epidemic proportions”

and

“widespread negative representations of Islam, and harmful stereotypes that depict Muslims and their beliefs and culture as a threat have served to perpetuate, validate and normalise discrimination, hostility and violence towards Muslim individuals and communities.”

All that is deeply disturbing, but what does it mean in practice for Muslims in Scotland? Well, the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), who is no longer in her place, touched on that. The Scottish Parliament’s cross-party group on challenging racial and religious prejudice, and Newcastle University, have told us a great deal: 75% of Muslims say that Islamophobia is an everyday issue; 80% of Muslims say that they have a friend or family member who has experienced it; 79% of Muslims are fearful of experiencing it; 84% argue that social media increases it; 85% say that the broadcast media promotes it; and 89% say that the print media promotes it. We know, and it has been reported, that Muslim women are disproportionately targeted in Islamophobic hate crimes. Again, those findings—from real people—are deeply worrying.

What, though, is the official, measured scale of the problem in Scotland? Well, the number of charges brought for religious hate crimes in Scotland over the decade between 2010-11 and 2021-22 sat at a constant of about 600 a year. Sadly, the number of charges for all hate crimes in Scotland sat at around 5,000 a year. In only one year of that same decade has the number risen above 6,000, but in only one year has it fallen below 5,000, so there is a constant background noise of religious and other hatred. We also know from the statistics that 26% of all religious hate crimes are directed at Muslims. I am sure we would all agree that no right-minded person would argue that those numbers are anything other than too high.

Hearteningly, Police Scotland and the Procurator Fiscal Service take these matters seriously. It is reported that more than 80% of all the charges for religious hate crime do end up in court. That will cover a multitude of sins, but I believe at least that that matter is taken seriously. We cannot therefore dismiss Islamophobia simply because the number of those charged has sat constantly at 600 a year. We cannot disregard any hate crime, when the number is sitting at about 5,000 a year in Scotland. We cannot downplay the impact of Islamophobia, because, as we have heard from the cross-party group and others, the effect on people is widespread and profound. We cannot diminish the impact of Islamophobia on Muslims,

or the rest of society, simply because a high proportion of the perpetrators are dragged to court, although I am glad that that is the case. And we cannot wish away the problem. Tackling it will need cogent, coherent and concrete action, with clear political leadership.

Let me return to the report by the Scottish Parliament cross-party group. Among many recommendations, it tells us that Scotland needs urgent education reforms to combat the scourge of Islamophobia—I am certain that is the case in England too. It tells us that Muslim women in Scotland are more likely to encounter Islamophobia than men, and calls for funding and support for organisations and initiatives that promote social cohesion and integration, particularly for Muslim women. I am certain that that demand would be mirrored in England as well. I will not go through the list of the many other recommendations the group makes, all of which I agree with.

I want now to get to the point on definition, because the cross-party group persuaded all of Scotland’s political parties to adopt the formal definition of Islamophobia. That was described as

“a landmark moment that will help tackle prejudice in Scotland.”

Members of the all-party group here will recognise the definition:

“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

If every political party represented in the Scottish Parliament can formally adopt that, I would agree with the Labour chair of the Scottish Parliament cross-party group, who said:

“I now urge the UK Government to adopt the definition so that we can challenge hatred and prejudice wherever it exists across the country.”

That does not strike me as being contentious; it ought to have been done already and if it has not been, it should be done very quickly indeed.

I want to end with a rebuttal to those who dismiss the issue of Islamophobia. I am talking about those hard of thinking who argue that there would be no Islamophobia “if only they”—whoever “they” are—“were more like ‘us’.” It is not clear what that means. I feel strongly on this and I wish to challenge that view by quoting something that UN Secretary-General António Guterres said when marking the first International Day to Combat Islamophobia, in 2021. He pointed out that anti-Muslim bigotry is part of a larger trend of a resurgence in ethno-nationalism, neo-Nazism, stigma and hate speech targeting vulnerable populations, including Muslims, Jews and some minority Christian communities, as well as others. He said:

“As the Holy Quran reminds us: nations and tribes were created to know one another. Diversity is a richness, not a threat”.

That mirrors what many have said; it is intolerance that is the problem, not diversity. It is incumbent on all of us to challenge intolerance, including Islamophobia, and to do so, to be brutally honest, whenever we see it.

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

3.9 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and the hon. Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for securing

this important debate. Islamophobia, like all forms of discrimination, serves to divide our communities. It is a grave form of injustice that restricts the ability of Muslims, or those perceived to be Muslims, to participate equally and completely in our society. Islamophobia culminates in violent hate crimes, targeted discrimination and structural disparities affecting access to employment, housing and healthcare, and it impedes the ability of those affected to go about their daily lives. Our failure to take action to tackle this hatred threatens our democratic principles of fairness and equality, and in so doing, undermines our social cohesion as a whole.

We see this hatred manifested online, on our streets and in our public spaces, and at its most extreme, in violent acts of terror and murder. We remember Makram Ali, who was senselessly murdered in Finsbury Park in 2017, alongside the attempted murder of nine others. That premeditated attack on innocent Muslims by a far-right attacker devastated victims, families and entire communities. We also remember two more grandfathers, Mushin Ahmed and Mohammed Saleem, as well as the victims of the Christchurch terrorist attacks. All had their lives tragically taken from them as a result of insidious hatred. This serves as a terrible reminder of the consequences of Islamophobia and the failure to tackle it.

This debate comes at a difficult time in the international community. The disgusting rise in both Islamophobia and antisemitism since the attack on 7 October exposed just how real the issue of discrimination is on Britain's streets. Let me start by condemning those brutal attacks and the shocking rise in racism that we have seen since that day. Since Hamas's terrorist attack, our country has seen a disgusting rise in antisemitism, with Jewish businesses attacked, Jewish schools marked with red paint and Jewish families hiding who they are. We have also seen an appalling surge in Islamophobia, with racist graffiti, mosques forced to ramp up security and British Muslims and Palestinians spoken to as though they were terrorists. While this debate focuses on the experiences of Islamophobia, we cannot lose sight of the ongoing injustice faced by the Jewish community in Britain.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the most telling points made during the debate was the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) saying at the conclusion of her speech that the most effective response to Islamophobia and antisemitism is when both communities stand by each other in resisting both those threats?

Liz Twist: Yes, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) made a very important point. We all need to stand together to ensure that we defeat Islamophobia and antisemitism.

Members who have taken part in this debate include my hon. Friends the Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaught), for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for Luton North (Sarah Owen), my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and my hon. Friends the Members for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Coventry South. All of them have spoken about their experiences and those of the communities in their constituencies. For some of the Members who have spoken, Islamophobia

has affected their safety and that of their communities. One thing they all have in common is that they were clear that we must act to tackle Islamophobia and ensure that we take real action, and all called on the Government to do that.

Year after year, British Muslims are the victims of the highest proportion of religiously motivated hate crime. Over the past 10 years, we have seen a shocking and rapid rise in incidents being reported to Tell MAMA, as we have heard, with cases doubling between 2012 and 2022. Tell MAMA's tireless commitment to tackling Islamophobia has ensured that we have a detailed database, from which it is possible to identify key trends emerging in frequency, scope and substance, so that we can work to tackle the particular forms that Islamophobia takes. That data shows that high-profile events act as a trigger for steep rises in bigotry, both online and at street level, as they are weaponised by perpetrators to drive discrimination and violence.

This week, Tell MAMA reported that it has recorded more than 1,200 cases following the Hamas terror attacks of 7 October, representing a sevenfold rise on the same period last year and the largest, most sustained spike in reports to its service across a 55-day reporting period. Behind these numbers are real people who have been subjected to abuse and harm.

It is vital that we come together in this House to say that Islamophobia is not acceptable in any form. The Labour party stands firmly with the victims of Islamophobic hatred and commits to working across our nation to ensure that it is eradicated. It is of utmost importance that we recognise the impact of Islamophobia on people's lives, and that we recognise the work of grassroots, community and religious organisations that have dedicated themselves to tackling it.

The message from Muslim communities and organisations is clear that, to tackle this bigotry, we must be able to identify it. Yet this Government have said that they do not support taking forward an official definition of Islamophobia. Following a six-month inquiry into the subject, the definition proposed by the APPG on British Muslims has been widely recognised and endorsed across many sections of civil society, including among academics, Muslim communities and prominent Muslim organisations. I am proud to say that we have adopted this definition in the Labour party, and it has also been adopted by the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the SNP and the Scottish Conservatives.

In 2021, Labour's shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the chair of the Labour party and the leader of the Local Government Association Labour group wrote to the leaders of all Labour groups in local government to encourage their councils to adopt this definition. Since then, hundreds of councils across the country have taken the APPG definition on board, yet the Government have seen fit to reject this definition and have since failed to come forward with an alternative definition of their own, as they had once promised. This dereliction is both substantive and symbolic in its failure to take Islamophobia seriously.

Rehman Chishti: The hon. Lady will have seen that I have challenged my Government's actions. If she were a Minister in that position, would she commit to appointing an independent adviser on Islamophobia straight away, as my party has on antisemitism? Can she confirm that,

[Rehman Chishti]

looking at the figures for Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred and antisemitism, there will be equal funding to deal with those two unacceptable forms of behaviour?

Liz Twist: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We first need to get the basics right by adopting this definition of Islamophobia. We are committed to taking further steps to ensure that Islamophobia is stamped out.

Tell MAMA has documented how this racism dehumanises Muslims, sometimes drawing on conspiracy theories to do so. It targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness, whether real or imagined, and in doing so reduces diverse communities of people to a group identity. The power of the APPG definition is that it recognises this. Just like the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, the APPG's definition is not legally binding. Instead, it is intended to serve as a workable yardstick for action against Islamophobia.

We must be able to name and identify Islamophobia, and that applies as much to the political arena as anywhere else. Just as high-profile events trigger peaks in discriminatory behaviour, what we say in this House and in our media has an impact on the abuse that people face online and on our streets. When the former Prime Minister, the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, referred to Muslim women as “letterboxes”, there was a dramatic rise in incidents reported to Tell MAMA. The week following his comments saw the number of incidents rise by 375%. Over that month, 42% of street-based cases directly referenced him or language used in his column.

Since then, we have continued to hear language in the House that risks endangering ethnic and religious minorities. We have seen the former Home Secretary refer to pro-Palestinian marches as “hate marches”, and the Conservative London mayoral candidate engaging in Islamophobic tropes.

Paul Bristow: I appreciate the hon. Lady giving way, but is she planning to react to criticisms from Labour Members on the Benches behind her, who cited the Forde inquiry, which stated that a “hierarchy of racism” operated in the Labour party?

Liz Twist: I thank the hon. Member for that comment, and I did indeed hear those comments. What I would say is that, within the Labour party, we are seeking to address any issues that relate to Islamophobia.

We must remember that we have a choice in this House: to empower communities or to seek to divide them. Our words have consequences beyond this Chamber. It is deeply worrying that the normalisation of extremist language from the Conservative party has directly coincided with a rise in offences being reported. As political parties, we must, as I said, take responsibility for identifying and tackling Islamophobia in our own ranks. When people ask, “Well, what’s Labour doing about it?”, the answer is that that is what we are doing: we have changed our party, and we are ready to change the country. At our party conference in 2021, Labour passed a new independent complaints process to make it fairer and easier for people to bring forward cases of discrimination. We have

adopted new codes of conduct on Islamophobia, and we have invested in training staff and publishing a handbook that will illustrate how our party can challenge Islamophobia directly. We have committed, when in government, to tackle structural racial inequalities with a landmark race equality Act.

We owe it to our Muslim communities and to communities of all faiths to do more to protect them from these forms of hate. The first step in tackling that hate is to identify it, so will the Minister commit today to adopting the APPG definition of Islamophobia? Will she also encourage Conservative-run local authorities to adopt it? Will she and her colleagues work with the police to ensure that victims of Islamophobic abuse feel able to report incidents and that they are supported and kept in the loop throughout the process? What steps will she take in her own Department to understand household and neighbourhood-related cases of Islamophobic abuse and to work with local authorities and Muslim communities to ensure that such cases are handled sensitively? Finally, what efforts are the Government making to understand and tackle Islamophobia in educational institutions and to eradicate ethnicity pay gaps?

We owe it to Muslim communities to tackle Islamophobia in our party and in wider society—on the streets of our country and online. We have committed to doing so, and I hope the Government will do the same.

3.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) for this debate, and I pay tribute to every Member who spoke. The hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) and for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) talked about their own personal experience of abuse, and I am deeply troubled by it.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) for his work as the special envoy for freedom of religion and belief, and I am always happy to talk to him. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), who represents a large Muslim community. I would also like to say to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) that I am happy to help facilitate a meeting. The debate also has personal significance for me, as mine is one of the most diverse constituencies in the country. In fact, I met the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) with a large delegation from Indonesia whom I had happened to bump into that morning at my local mosque. I am privileged in that more than 12% of my electorate in Kensington are Muslim, and Kensington is home to the al-Manaar mosque, which played a pivotal role of support during the Grenfell tragedy and the pandemic. My constituency is also home to the Ismaili Centre in South Kensington, the religious and cultural centre of Ismaili Muslims in the UK, who have such a tradition of charitable giving.

Many Members have said today that this is not an issue simply of one religion, and I am pleased that there is a very active interfaith group in my constituency where representatives of the al-Manaar mosque, the Holland Park synagogue, the Holland Park gurdwara and several Christian churches come together regularly.

We met collectively soon after 7 October. I am also proud of the fact that the first Muslim MP to become a Secretary of State and the holder of one of the great offices of state was a Conservative—my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who is also a good friend of mine.

I pay tribute to our British Muslim communities who make a huge contribution to the United Kingdom in all walks of life, and to the strengthening of the ties that bind our country together. We have 3.9 million British Muslims, 6.5% of the UK population. Earlier this year, the Prime Minister hosted an Iftar and an Eid reception at 10 Downing Street, where he was joined by many committed champions of Muslim charities and organisations who, day in day out, enrich our social capital. Muslim values are, of course, British values. Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law and equal rights are what define us as a society, and recognising and championing those shared values is the greatest defence against those who would seek to divide us.

Naz Shah: I genuinely welcome the Minister's response and the passion with which she is laying out her thoughts, but is she aware that there is a list that Muslim organisations have to tick in order to enjoy those samosas that are offered at 10 Downing Street? The Muslim Council of Britain, one of the largest mainstream Muslim organisations, does not make the list. Organisations that do not agree with the Government are not included in it. Will the Minister be encouraging 10 Downing Street to change that policy?

Felicity Buchan: I am very much of the view that 10 Downing Street is in a position to decide whom to invite. I do not think that I am in that position.

I want to make it very clear that this Government will not tolerate anti-Muslim hatred in any form, and will seek to stamp it out where it occurs. Sadly, however, as we have heard, since the beginning of the conflict between Israel and Hamas we have witnessed a substantial increase in the number of incidents of anti-Muslim hatred reported in Britain. The Government are deeply concerned about the sharp rise in anti-Muslim hatred, which comes alongside a steep increase in antisemitic incidents, as well as wider community tensions. Tell MAMA, as many have said, has documented a total of more than 1,200 anti-Muslim cases as of 30 November. This represents an unacceptable sevenfold surge compared to the same period in 2022, and the biggest and most sustained spike in reports to Tell MAMA across a 55-day reporting period.

The Prime Minister has been clear that we stand with British Muslim communities, and he recently visited Tell MAMA to see first-hand the work it is doing to support British Muslims at this difficult time. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Secretary have also met Tell MAMA and Muslim experts to hear from them about the challenges arising from the conflict.

Sarah Owen: On the anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia that the Minister describes, could she define what that Islamophobia is? In May 2023 one of her ministerial colleagues in the Department said that they would not accept the APPG's definition and wrote:

"The proposed definition could also unintentionally undermine freedom of speech and prevent legitimate criticism of Islamist extremism or unacceptable cultural practices."

Can the Minister describe how that is the case?

Felicity Buchan: I will go on to talk about definitions, but I will continue briefly on Tell MAMA, if I may.

This year Tell MAMA marked its 10-year anniversary. Over the past decade, I am glad to say, it has directly assisted more than 20,000 people with casework, advice, emotional and counselling support and signposting. I am also proud that the Government have given Tell MAMA more than £6 million of funding since its inception in 2012. In light of the current increase in reports to Tell MAMA, we have uplifted its funding to more than £1 million this financial year to support it with the rise in casework.

In addition to supporting Tell MAMA and bringing together Muslim voices, we have extended the deadline for applications to the protective security for mosques scheme. Mosques and Muslim community centres will now have until 31 December to apply for funding for the scheme. The extension has been granted in light of the current tensions we see playing out on UK streets and comes with an additional £5 million of funding this year, bringing the total Government funding for the scheme to just under £30 million. That announcement was made at the autumn statement. That is vital funding that mosques and, for the first time, Muslim faith schools can use to procure physical security measures to combat the discrimination and intolerance faced by Muslim communities. I am pleased to say that that funding will continue into 2025. Plans are in place to introduce guarding services for both mosques and Muslim faith schools later this year.

Dr Offord: Will the Minister give way?

Felicity Buchan: I will, but this will be the last intervention I will take.

Dr Offord: I am grateful to the Minister. She will be aware that the Community Security Trust, which is based in my constituency, has long offered advice and assistance to other faith groups, including Muslim schools and mosques, to ensure that their safety is equally paramount to that of the Jewish community.

Felicity Buchan: I pay tribute to the CST for all the work it does. I have mentioned that security funding provision for mosques is just under £30 million, but I can tell hon. Members that the total security budget for faith communities is £50.9 million in total.

Naz Shah rose—

Felicity Buchan: I am afraid I am not going to take any more interventions. I have already taken one from the hon. Lady and I am conscious that there is another debate to come.

We remain fully committed to tackling anti-Muslim hatred head on, through a co-ordinated cross-departmental effort, working with the Home Office and obviously with the police. We already have some of the strongest legislation in the world to tackle hate crime and, where groups incite racial hatred or are engaged in racially or religiously motivated criminal activity, we would expect them to be prosecuted and to face the full force of the law. To help to improve our understanding of hate crime,

[Felicity Buchan]

we have been working closely with the police in recent years to improve our data and we can now disaggregate hate crimes by ethnicity and by religion.

Our support for British Muslims is reflected by our strong track record of working with international partners to respond to hatred and intolerance and to promote freedom of religion and belief. To that end, in response to a question from an hon. Member, we are proud to have supported the United Nations General Assembly resolution last year establishing 15 March as International Day to Combat Islamophobia.

Naz Shah *rose—*

Felicity Buchan: I have said that I will take no more interventions.

Before I finish, I want to clarify this Government's position on terminology. I thank the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims and the two co-chairs, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough, for the work they have championed to celebrate the contributions of British Muslims and to tackle prejudice, discrimination and hatred against Muslims in the UK. However, I want to make it clear that this Government do not accept that particular definition of Islamophobia. The definition proposed by the APPG is not in line with the Equality Act 2010, which defines race in terms of colour, nationality and national or ethnic origins. The proposed definition could also unintentionally undermine freedom of speech. The term "anti-Muslim hatred" is more precise and better reflects UK hate crime legislation. Let me put it in simple terms: free speech entitles people to express views on religion or ideology, but they must not hate or discriminate against someone because of their religion. That is why we think that "anti-Muslim hatred" is a more appropriate term.

I have been asked about the Government's future steps. I am glad to say that we are undertaking broad and extensive engagement on religious hatred against all communities. We are considering all issues as part of that, including definitions. We know that British Muslims feel especially vulnerable at this time. I hope it is crystal clear through the many initiatives that I have outlined that this Government will always stand up for British Muslims. They are an integral part of our proudly plural, multi-faith, multi-ethnic United Kingdom. We have said loud and clear that anti-Muslim hatred has no place in British society and we will not allow the scourge of religious hatred to manifest in any shape or form.

During debates such as these, I often reflect on the wisdom of the former Member for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox, when she remarked:

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

This Government are committed to ensuring that the values of diversity, tolerance and compassion extend to all our communities.

3.38 pm

Naz Shah: There we have it. I thank everyone who has spoken in the debate, but the Government policy and response to tackling Islamophobia is: "We'll pick and choose who we invite to No. 10 for tea and samosas, but no policy. And we will not accept your definition as you Muslims decide to define it based on your experience of discrimination. No, we don't accept it, because we are the Government, and when it comes to you Muslims, we will apply not the liberal democratic principles that we apply to the rest of the country, but a totalitarian approach." That is the Government's response to tackling Islamophobia. Well done.

What was I expecting? Dare I imagine a Government who would not miss another opportunity to put policy in place to tackle Islamophobia? No; just a long list of opportunities missed by this Government and this Prime Minister, who "stands with the British Muslim communities." No—not unless they fit the Government's criteria.

If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck and swims like a duck, it is a duck. If it feels like gaslighting and sounds like gaslighting, as a Muslim and a representative of a large, Muslim constituency of Bradford, let me tell the Government: it is gaslighting. That is what we have had from those on the Government Benches today. What a shame that they did not uphold the British values that bring us here: the British values of equality, fairness, justice and treating people equally. The Government are saying, "Let's treat you Muslims differently. We are not going to give you a definition of Islamophobia, and we do not want you to have a say on what it feels like to experience Islamophobia. We will just call it anti-Muslim hatred."

The hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) was right to say that the Prime Minister is not just gaslighting, but has created a hierarchy of racism. He does not treat Islamophobia as equal, and it disheartens me. I will just wait for the next general election and let people vote with their feet by choosing the party that stands for equality, justice and fairness. It certainly ain't the Tories.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling Islamophobia.

Beneficial Ownership Registers: Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies

3.41 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the implementation of public registers of beneficial ownership in the UK's Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies; believes that the Government needs to respect the will of Parliament and meet the implementation deadline at the end of 2023; encourages the Government to lay an Order in Council formally requiring the UK's Overseas Territories to implement public registers of beneficial ownership if the deadline is not met; and considers public registers of beneficial ownership to be an essential transparency measure to combat tax evasion, money laundering and other economic crimes.

This debate should not be necessary. The House expressed its view when it agreed an amendment to the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 that required overseas territories to voluntarily introduce registers of beneficial ownership within two years or face an Order in Council mandating compliance. Five years have passed since the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and I moved the amendment, and the only overseas territory to comply with the legislation is Gibraltar, which I salute. While I understand that the Minister is making progress with some of the other jurisdictions, they have yet to comply with our legislation.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Journalists have revealed that the family of Asif Aziz, a landlord to my constituents in Britannia Point, Colliers Wood, manages a large property portfolio registered under dozens of companies on the Isle of Man. There is no beneficial owner listed, so complaints can never reach the landlord. We already have legislation that requires offshore companies that own properties to declare their owners on a register. Does my right hon. Friend agree that properly resourced enforcement is essential, and that having public registers of beneficial owners would make it much easier to identify and scrutinise the beneficial owners of offshore shell companies?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing that to our attention. Sadly, it is an issue not just of enforcement but of definition. I bet that the landlord in her constituency owns the properties through a trust, and there is no openness about beneficial ownership of trusts. She makes a very important point.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise for not being able to stay for the whole debate.

I strongly support this debate. I put it to the right hon. Lady that the reason why people hide things in trusts and offshore is either to avoid embarrassment or to avoid tax. People ought to do better, so that they will not be embarrassed, and they ought to pay tax properly.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I thank the hon. Member for his support. I agree that it is partly about reputation and partly about avoiding tax, but it is also about indulging in economic crime, from money laundering through to the worst crimes that stain our country and our economy.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As the Father of the House has just intervened and I am the longest-serving Member on the Opposition side of the House, may I say that I am a long-term supporter of what my right hon. Friend has been trying to do? Owing to our time together as undergraduates at the London School of Economics, I know that she is a determined woman. Let us get on with it—let us hold these people to account and change the law.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I thank my hon. Friend for his support—he is probably my oldest friend in the House; we go back many years—and I hope that the Government heard his urging.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Could we add one more to the list of reasons why people conceal their identities in this way, which is to avoid sanctions, including sanctions placed by our own Government?

Dame Margaret Hodge: The right hon. Member makes a really important point, which I will come to later. He is right: this is a national security threat as well as a threat to our economy.

The Government have yet to comply with the legislation by making an Order in Council to mandate compliance by the overseas territories. After discussions between the Crown dependencies and the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and myself, the three Crown dependencies—Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man—announced in May 2019 that they were committed to introducing public registers and set out a plan to do so. Although I welcomed that in principle, I was concerned that their commitment was qualified and that their action plan contained a number of opt-out clauses. However, on the basis of their commitment, we chose not to legislate but to trust them. It now seems that our trust was misplaced. They are reneging on that commitment and using every excuse not to comply.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I understand how strongly the right hon. Member feels. May I point out that, as a matter of constitutional fact, we have no right to legislate for any of the Crown dependencies? Constitutionally, they are not subject to the jurisdiction of this Parliament.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I have enormous respect and time for the hon. Member, but I have an opinion from a renowned KC that we sought at that time—I will come to it later—which contradicts entirely his point and says that we do have the constitutional right to legislate.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I want to comment not on the substance of what the right hon. Lady is talking about but merely on the procedural aspects. She will know that the Procedure Committee is looking at the impact of legislation in this place on devolved legislatures, the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies, and I am interested in her comments and look forward to her speech, but does she agree that we should try to find a way for the voice of the overseas territories to be heard when we legislate in this place if there are implications for them?

Dame Margaret Hodge: Indeed. I would love for us to be able to do this in a consensual way; that would obviously be the best way to proceed. Sadly, we have been waiting for 10 years, and my patience has worn a little thin. Given the implications both for national security and for the economy, the time has come to say, “Enough is enough.” We should use the powers that we have.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The right hon. Member is being generous with her time. The 2022 ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union stated that unrestricted public access to beneficial ownership information was incompatible with the right to life. Will she cover that?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I will. The hon. Member will know as well as I do that we are no longer a member of the European Union, so we are not bound by that finding.

Why does all this matter? The epidemic of tax avoidance, tax evasion and economic crime flourishes in an environment of secrecy, and our overseas territories and Crown dependencies facilitate that secrecy. We know from the ever-growing number of leaks of data on financial misdemeanours that their role is central to enabling economic crime. Half the shell companies exposed in the 2016 Panama papers were incorporated in the British Virgin Islands. In 2017, the Paradise papers—a massive tranche of documents leaked from the offshore law firm Appleby—showed that a frightening number of frontline politicians held secret accounts, with the overseas territories appearing prominently as destinations of choice for hiding money. Those included people such as Justin Trudeau’s chief fundraiser, Donald Trump’s Commerce Secretary, Brazil’s Finance Minister, Uganda’s Foreign Minister, and our own Lord Ashcroft, who had—and probably still has—a Bermuda-based trust where he hides some of his wealth.

Some 20% of the files in the FinCEN—Financial Crimes Enforcement Network—leak of 2020 contained clients that listed an address in the British Virgin Islands. The leak also revealed, because it was a leak of documents from an American agency, that the Americans viewed Britain as a higher-risk jurisdiction for its role in money laundering and financial crime. The Pandora papers leak of 2021 involved 12 million files, with data from 14 different law firms and company services providers. Over two thirds of the companies analysed in that batch of leaked documents were registered in the BVI. A World Bank review of 213 corruption cases that were investigated over the 30-year period to 2010 found that 70% involved anonymous shell companies. The UK, its overseas territories and Crown dependencies accounted for the second jurisdiction in terms of the number of corruption cases associated with it.

Mr Sheerman: What I am learning from my right hon. Friend’s excellent speech is that London is the centre of the world for hiding money, because so many professionals in this city know how to do it. Is that correct?

Dame Margaret Hodge: Yes. Sadly, London has become the jurisdiction of choice for too much of our dirty money. The all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax has been successful—albeit

not as much as I would have liked—in achieving changes to economic crime legislation to challenge and start tackling that.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on leading the debate, and more particularly on the forensic and persistent way she has dealt with this issue over so many years. It is clear that London is the centre of much of the wrongdoing in this area. That is not a coincidence; it is because the Government have been permissive. Has she had an indication of whether they are now prepared to back her proposals?

Dame Margaret Hodge: My hon. Friend is right. I have often said that it is not just this Government who have done that; the Labour Government, in their time, also deregulated to such an extent that they allowed London to become the centre of this activity. I do not feel that the Government are doing all that they can to try to turn that around. I await a future Labour Government, and I will watch Labour Ministers with an eagle eye to ensure that they do that.

The debate is not just about the role of the overseas territories and Crown dependencies in facilitating economic crime; their activities as secrecy jurisdictions are a threat to our national security, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) said. The Foreign Affairs Committee said as much in a report on the matter, and as recently as November it called on the Government to ensure that the overseas territories fulfil their commitment, adding that

“there should be no further deadline extensions.”

We know, for example, that between 2008 and 2018, £68 billion flowed out of Russia and into our overseas territories. We are a favourite jurisdiction for receiving Russian-laundered money. We know that individuals who are sanctioned use the overseas territories and Crown dependencies to hide their assets just before sanctioning to prevent those assets from being frozen. Abramovich and Usmanov are two classic examples of that practice.

We know the role of the overseas territories in preventing us from knowing the actual beneficial owner of property in the UK. Over 70% of the properties in the list of those that we know about are owned by companies registered either in the Crown dependencies or the BVI. We still cannot identify the beneficial owners of two thirds of those 70%, because they use trusts to hide their identity, and 85%—more than eight out of 10—of those trust arrangements are based in the three Crown dependencies and the BVI.

Most recently, in the Cyprus papers, which have just been uncovered, we found a direct link between Vladimir Putin and Roman Abramovich, with money going from Abramovich to two men dubbed as “wallets” for Putin—a man whose salary is \$100,000, but whose wealth is rumoured to be between \$125 billion and \$200 billion. The theft of money from the Russian people is facilitated by secrecy jurisdictions such as Cyprus, but also by our own tax havens.

The problem is massive, and the role of our overseas territories and Crown dependencies is central. Baron Cameron of Chipping Norton understood that when he went to Davos in January 2013—over 10 years ago—and warned multinationals to “wake up and smell the coffee”.

I will give a few more quotes from him. In 2013, he pledged:

“Every one of the Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories are going to have an action plan on beneficial ownership”.

He told the overseas territories to rip aside the “cloak of secrecy” by creating public registers of beneficial ownership. In 2014, he wrote to the overseas territories, saying that public registers were

“vital to meeting the urgent challenges of illicit finance and tax evasion.”

In September 2015, he accused them of

“frankly...not moving anywhere near fast enough...if we want to break the business model of people stealing money and hiding it in places where it can't be seen: transparency is the answer.”

When Lord Cameron launched our UK register in 2016, he said that

“it's better for us all to have an open system which everyone has access to, because the more eyes that look at this information the more accurate it will be.”

At the anti-corruption summit in May 2016, he said:

“We've talked about the need for every country to ultimately reach what I call the gold standard of having a public register of beneficial ownership. And I am clear that I include all the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies.”

Lord Cameron is now in a position to act, and I urge the Minister to tell his boss to do so. When even Nigeria, Ukraine, Albania and Morocco have introduced public registers, why can our tax havens not?

Using the European Court of Justice ruling to delay the implementation of public registers is a convenient but lame excuse. It actually has not deterred Gibraltar. While some countries have closed their registers, others have kept them open. Crown dependencies in particular are acting in a completely dishonourable way. Their role in facilitating economic crime and tax avoidance is indisputable, and their protestations to the contrary are simply untrue. Their behaviour in providing public assurances that they will move towards public registers but claiming that the European court ruling prevents them from doing so is, in my view, unforgivable.

Mr Sheerman: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I absolutely support everything that she is saying, but can we also have more publicity about what is happening with people who do not pay tax in this country? Jim Ratcliffe of INEOS has become very rich and now does not pay tax in this country. I understand that the *Daily Mail* does not pay any taxes. Could we not have an ad in *The Sunday Times* rich list about those who actually pay their taxes?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am left wondering whether *The Sunday Times* would ever publish that—we shall see.

Let me address the point made by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill). In April 2019, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and I sought legal advice about whether it would be constitutionally lawful for the UK Parliament to legislate to compel all Crown dependencies to establish public registers of beneficial ownership. I have the advice here, which concluded:

“It is beyond doubt that the intrusion of criminal funds into the UK economy threatens the interests of the UK. It is also beyond doubt that extensive funds in this category emanate from the Crown dependencies.”

The last sentence states: “The proposed amendment”—we put an amendment to the King's Counsel to consider whether it was lawful—

“is a constitutionally legitimate and lawful exercise of the UK's powers to secure its domestic interests by protecting confidence in its financial institutions and the integrity of the commercial life of the nation”.

Finally—I recognise that we are running out of time—I want to touch on the compromise that I think the Minister is seeking to secure in his negotiations with our tax havens. The compromise is that in order to have access, a member of the public needs to have a legitimate interest, a term that was introduced in the European Union's sixth anti-money laundering directive. We already have that proviso in relation to the register of overseas properties, and I draw to the Minister's attention the fact that Transparency International has put in inquiries in six cases to get information, has waited for four to six months, and has then seen those requests for information turned down by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. All of those requests were in relation to trusts listed as the beneficial owners of overseas companies that hold property here in the UK, and we would have expected them to be on that register and for the information to be provided.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Surely, every single citizen of this country has a legitimate interest in closing the kinds of loopholes that have allowed rotten, dirty money to come flooding into our jurisdiction. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it has had huge detrimental effects on ordinary people—who do not have trust funds and are unlikely to inherit anything—such as the huge increases in property prices that have forced many people out of the housing market?

Dame Margaret Hodge: My hon. Friend makes an important point: those who suffer the most are the poorest in our community. One must remember that no tax is levied on all this illicit finance, so it does not fund the public services that we require. I would also point out to the Minister that a legitimate interest proviso does not meet the requirements of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018: the terms of the draft Order in Council specifically said that we want “a compliant publicly accessible register”.

I ask the Minister to think about that.

Sunlight is the best disinfectant—we all know that. If we are serious about our effects to clamp down on dirty money and eliminate it from Britain, and from our overseas territories and Crown dependencies, we must have public registers, so that we can at the very least start to follow the money.

Sir Julian Lewis: For the sake of people who might not be experts in this field, can the right hon. Lady explain the extent to which those Crown dependencies and overseas territories themselves know where the real ownership of the resources resides? Can we be sure that they themselves know what information is being concealed and ought to be made public, or that we will have got to the bottom of the matter if it is made public?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am not sure I can answer that, because I do not know whether they know, but there have been one or two instances where whistleblowers

[*Dame Margaret Hodge*]

have come to see me—about Jersey, for example. It has been very difficult to find out and identify how much the Jersey authorities knew, and why or whether they took action on the information that is available. It would be wonderful if the right hon. Gentleman's Committee could look at this issue in greater detail to establish that.

Illicit finance is not just an evil in itself: it is the golden thread that runs through all serious crime, from drug smuggling to people smuggling. It threatens our national security, hits the poorest countries the hardest, and starves our public services of much-needed investment. It was in recognition of that importance that we established the strong cross-party consensus in the House that led to the 2018 law, which was agreed unanimously in this House. Ten years have passed since David Cameron first openly supported public registers, and five years have passed since we legislated, but we are still waiting. That is not good enough.

It is the job of the Executive to implement the will of Parliament. To that end, I ask the Minister to take two actions. First, will he now lay an Order in Council, requiring the overseas territories to introduce public registers of beneficial ownership forthwith? Secondly, will he legislate to require Crown dependencies to do the same? If the Government do not act, I can assure him that Parliament will, for we must—for the sake of our economy, for the sake of our security and for the sake of our reputation. I urge the Government to move forward on this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Five people have indicated that they wish to speak, and the wind-ups will begin at 4.30. That means eight minutes for Richard Thomson, 10 minutes each for Stephen Doughty and Mr Rutley, and two minutes for Margaret Hodge to wind up. If people stick to five minutes, everybody will get equal time.

4.5 pm

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to see the right hon. Member for Barking (*Dame Margaret Hodge*) in her place and I congratulate her on securing this debate. She and I have agreed on many issues and have worked together closely in the past. I happen to support the concept of a public register of beneficial ownership in the United Kingdom, and I supported it when it was first introduced.

I declare my interest as chair of the Gibraltar all-party parliamentary group. As the right hon. Lady has observed, Gibraltar has established a public register of beneficial ownership. It is right, therefore, that we should not treat all the overseas territories as homogenous. In one respect, Gibraltar, with its particular links both to the United Kingdom and Europe, has chosen to go in that direction, and we should support it in having done so. That was its decision as a self-governing overseas territory. It has continued to do that, even though it must be observed—and we should not make light of this fact—that the ruling of the European Court of Justice has now meant that some 23 of the 27 EU states have closed their registers. We should be careful about dismissing that. It does not apply to us anymore, because we have left the European Union, but we should not dismiss that fact and simply pooh-pooh it, because it has an impact on others. Gibraltar chose, despite that, to continue with its register.

That brings us to the position of the Crown dependencies. I refer to this matter, of course, as chair of the Justice Committee; we have to remember that the constitutional position of the Crown dependencies is totally different from that of the overseas territories. They are not part of the United Kingdom and never have been. I say that with due respect to any legal opinion that can be produced—frankly, though, one legal opinion counts for very little against centuries of constitutional convention and the views of successive British Governments of all parties.

The simple fact is that the Crown dependencies have never been subject to this Parliament. They are not represented in this Parliament. They have their own legislatures, which are sovereign in those matters. We should not allow good intentions to lead us into arrogance as an institution and purport to legislate in areas where we have no right. I happen to think that, if I were in one of those legislatures, I might well be making the case for broadening out their registers, but it is not for us to presume to do so.

There has been some progress. As a Select Committee, we took some evidence from the Crown dependencies in our role of scrutinising the Ministry of Justice, which handles the relationship—it is not the Foreign Office that does so. I am delighted to see the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (*Mike Freer*) in his place. He has established a very constructive relationship with the Crown dependencies.

What we have is this: the Crown dependencies have chosen at the moment not to go down the route that we have gone down. If we want them to go down that route, we must persuade them to do so of their own volition as sovereign independent countries. That may well be where they get to. At the end of the day, there has been some movement. As a matter of fact, were they here, they would say that they do have central, fully compliant, authorised and accurate registers of beneficial ownership. They are not open to the public as of yet, but they do meet international standards. They are subject to the Moneyval monitoring process of the European Union and they comply with all the international standards. We have chosen to go further than those standards, but they have gone as far as that.

Secondly, all three of them, in lockstep on national interest matters and money laundering, transpose into their domestic law all the sanctions that we have brought in as the UK in relation to Russia, and it is no good pretending otherwise. The national security argument is therefore, frankly, a rather thin one. There are better arguments to make, such as good practice. None the less, they told us when they gave evidence to the Committee that there has been an intention to move towards a greater degree of openness in their registers. They have taken the view, and it is their choice at the moment, on their legal advice—their legal system is as good in their sphere as ours is in ours—that they wish to take stock of the decision of the European Court of Justice and the impacts it may have on them, not least because they have a data adequacy agreement with the EU.

When they read the detailed decision of the ECJ, as I have, the Crown dependencies found difficulties in both a disproportionality between general public access and rights to privacy—those rights under the charter of fundamental rights, I might observe, mirror exactly

those in the European convention on human rights, which, as it happens, binds us still—and in relation to data protection. They were concerned about a potential risk to their data protection equivalence with the EU.

Let us hope that we are able to find a way in which we can all agree a sensible step forward. As I understand it, the Crown dependencies are committed to making an announcement later this month that they will be extending their work further. They are looking first of all at obliged entities—people who need to carry out due diligence—and then at the concept of legitimate interest. That is a step forward. Let us perhaps wait and see what they say. We will get more progress with our Crown dependency friends by co-operation and discussion than we will, with respect, by lecturing.

4.11 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing this debate, and for her consistent and tireless work in tackling the scourge of illicit finance. As she said, the introduction of public registers of beneficial ownership in our country's offshore financial centres ought not to need debating, and it should have happened many years ago. Yesterday, after seven long years, the Hillsborough families finally got a response from the Government to Bishop Jones's report, yet it was a response that rejected his key recommendations. This Government have been even more tardy when it comes to delivering on their declared policy of public registers of beneficial ownership.

It has been almost 10 years since the Prime Minister, Lord Cameron, called on our overseas territories and dependencies to raise their transparency standards, and not a lot has happened, as we have heard. After five years, amendments were made to what became the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, requiring territories and dependencies to act. By that time, the Prime Minister had gambled and lost the Brexit referendum, and he had left office, left Parliament and got embroiled in the dubious activities of Lex Greensill, and still nothing had changed.

The case for transparency is clear and unarguable, and the fight against crime and corruption requires it, but we are still no further forward. Lord Cameron has returned to Parliament in a new guise as Foreign Secretary. I hope he will once more be directly responsible for policy in this area, and I hope he will be able to help us make some real and meaningful progress. The public disclosure of company ownership information would facilitate the trailing of money and identity and illicit activity, and deter money laundering, crime and sanctions busting, and it is essential that we make progress.

Labour has repeatedly tried to push the Government to act. Both last year and this year, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) moved amendments to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which would have required the Government to lay an Order in Council and to make some progress, but the Government defeated them. They continue to say they are doing things while achieving no real outcome that makes a difference.

The facilitating of illicit finance through our overseas territories and Crown dependencies poses a serious threat in a number of ways. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking said, it deprives the public purse of

funds, and it prevents true economic stability. It poses very real threats to our national security, and it affects each and every citizen of this country, be it in underfunded public services, higher than expected property prices, illicit crime or organised crime in our communities. All of that affects each and every one of the constituents of Members up and down the country. The financial cost of global tax evasion, enabled by a lack of transparency in our territories and dependencies, is staggering to contemplate. Tax Justice found that 35% of global tax losses suffered by countries around the world occur in the UK and its network of overseas territories and Crown dependencies. That is a shameful statistic.

The lack of transparency in offshore jurisdictions facilitates myriad other illicit activities at great cost to our country. Companies based in overseas territories have enabled corruption cases to the tune of £250 billion. Notably, an astonishing 92% of those were registered in the British Virgin Islands. For context, £250 billion is more than the whole of the UK's foreign aid budget for the past 20 years. That money is going unaccounted for, when it could be working for our communities.

With war raging in Europe and the middle east, and contemplating the revelations the House heard earlier about organised attempts by the Russian FSB to interfere in UK elections, it is clear that the threat is growing. The cross-party Foreign Affairs Committee has rightfully called for public registers as a "matter of national security". Increasingly, I believe that the risk to the UK's international reputation is growing. Our reputation has already been substantially damaged. It is in the public interest for the Minister to tell us what he is going to do as a matter of urgency to deal with this growing threat.

4.16 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for the debate and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) on securing it.

As Members will know, there are many functions of beneficial ownership, both licit and illicit. Regardless of the legality of the arrangements, it goes without saying that a public register of these beneficial ownerships would play a vital role in combating tax evasion and other such unlawful activities—we can all agree with that. It is the desire of everyone in this House and of the Governments of the overseas territories that we work towards better transparency, to ensure these islands and territories are no longer associated with being tax havens and hotbeds of illegal financial activity. Places, including the overseas territories, do not want to be considered as such. When people from those places travel, their experience is clouded by comments they receive from others about how they harbour terrorist money or are all money launderers. That is simply unfair.

Many of the territories have already demonstrated progress in the fight against money laundering and tax evasion, none more so than the Cayman Islands. People may know that I have some links with the Cayman Islands. I do not have a bank account there, but I have many friends there and I have been involved in environmental matters in the country. The Cayman Government take the fight against illicit finance very seriously. In 2019, they were among eight territories committed to introducing a publicly accessible register

[Dr Matthew Offord]

by the end of the year. Progress has been made: draft proposals were initially published in 2021 and a consultation began shortly after.

Aside from the implementation of the register, the Cayman Islands have made great strides in navigating the complex intersections of transparency, governance and international standards, and it is worth bringing those to light so that they may serve as an example for other overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and provide Members with some hope that they are playing their part. For example, the Cayman Islands operates tax co-operation agreements with over 100 countries, including participation in the US Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act.

The Cayman Islands follow the common reporting standards—a global standard set by the OECD and advocated by the G20 nations. The progress made by the Cayman Islands has been recognised by the financial action taskforce, which confirmed that its anti-money laundering regime effectively deters and prosecutes financial crimes in the territory, and by His Majesty's Government for effective implementation of its Russian sanctions taskforce, Operation Hektor. I know that Russian finance is of particular concern to many Members. It is worth noting that Operation Hektor has so involved the deregistration of more than 50 vessels and aircraft and the freezing of accounts worth approximately \$8.32 billion and €230.1 million. That goes to show that there are many effective ways in which the overseas territories can tackle illicit finance operating in their jurisdictions.

Back in 2020, Ministers were clear that the introduction of comprehensive public registers would be a considerable ask for many overseas territories, particularly those that do not possess any existing company beneficial ownership register. It is worth pointing out that the Cayman Islands has, since 2017, maintained an electronic register of beneficial ownership information for all corporate and legal entities. Any such arrangement in the islands is verified and updated by authorised corporate service providers, which then pass on the information to UK law enforcement within 24 hours, under the exchange-of-notes agreement established in 2017.

That said, complexities arise with the proviso that public accessibility be at an accepted international standard, particularly among EU member states. As Members are aware, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill) mentioned, the 2022 ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union stated that unrestricted public access to beneficial ownership information is incompatible with the right to private life. We may not be in the European Union any more, but the sentiment of many of those rulings remains. I know that, following that ruling, many territories sought legal and constitutional advice on the impact. Perhaps the Minister could provide his own assessment of the ruling, and tell us how he is working with territories to counteract it and ensure the smooth transition to public registers.

I know that Governments of the overseas territories and dependencies will be listening closely to this debate. I have no doubt of their commitment to providing the transparency needed. I also trust that many Members present, and the Government, will appreciate the work that has already been undertaken.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I will call Marie Rimmer and then Meg Hillier. You must sit down by half-past 4, so perhaps you can divide the time between you.

4.21 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing the debate.

Our country, with its Crown dependencies and overseas territories, is responsible for 35% of global tax loss. The UK tax gap is estimated by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to be worth £36 billion. Those billions of pounds could be spent helping our NHS or fixing our schools' leaking roofs, but sadly, they are instead propping up Putin and his cronies as they try to destroy Ukraine. The past year has put a spotlight on dirty money laundered and hidden here, yet that problem has been around for years. We must act now to ensure that we are not indirectly responsible for horrors continuing to occur by failing to tackle dirty money, be it in London, the British Virgin Islands or one of our other territories. We have a duty to the people of Ukraine to do our bit.

We have heard many times from the Dispatch Box about how much support we are rightly giving to Ukraine, but the Government must press our Crown dependencies and overseas territories, which are the Russians' laundromat of choice, to do the same. Transparency International has identified 237 cases of corruption enabled by companies based in the overseas territories. Those cases are worth an astonishing £250 billion, which was diverted via rigged procurement, bribery, embezzlement and the unlawful acquisition of state assets. All those cases passed through companies registered in our overseas territories. The presidential family of the Republic of Congo have enriched themselves to the sum of at least £500 million by completing dodgy oil deals through companies based in Anguilla, all while the Congo sits in billions of pounds of debt.

Of all the cases, 92% of those were registered in the British Virgin Islands. The scale of the financial damage caused by those companies is £196 billion, which is greater than the UK's foreign aid budget over the past 20 years. We in this House often talk about our responsibility to the world and to mankind, and about our duty to help the world's poorest—that is why we believe in foreign aid—yet monumental sums are being robbed from countries around the world by despots and dictators and then stored in our territories. Our duty to the world requires us to do more to crack down on it. Quite frankly, every time there is a series of leaks—from the Panama papers and the Paradise Papers to the "Cyprus Confidential" dossier—it is an embarrassment to our country, and it is not going away.

As has been set out, one of the most effective ways to crack down on the problem is with public registers of who owns the companies in our overseas territories and Crown dependencies. There has been enough talk about cracking down on tax avoidance for decades; it is now time for realistic and pragmatic action for good. Fraud, tax and sanction avoidance, and other economic crime can be cracked down on only if it is possible to follow the money. The Government cannot expect law enforcement to crack down on tax avoidance if it is not given the tools it needs to do it. We can do it and we have said we will do it, so we should get on and do it!

Public registers can also help to restore public faith in the tax system by helping to expose the high levels of aggressive tax avoidance and evasion that we know take place. In the long term, public registers can contribute to creating a fairer and less lopsided tax system. That allows the Government of the day to collect tax effectively, and fairly invest in our public services and infrastructure. Public registers of beneficial ownership are a sensible transparency measure, with broad cross-party support. The Government have repeatedly expressed their support for establishing public registers, but we are still waiting for them to be set up. They were supposed to be set up by the end of 2023. This situation cannot go on. The Foreign Secretary needs to get this over the line. We need to be able to identify who the true owner of offshore wealth is. We need to be able to uphold the law and make sure that tax is paid. We need to remove the veil of secrecy that, sadly, exists in too many of our territories and dependencies.

4.26 pm

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the passion of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer). I have been on this journey with my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) since I served on the Public Accounts Committee when she was chairing it—shockingly, it is now 10 years on from that. We began to deal with some of the domestic issues with companies that had international footprints—the large companies such as Starbucks, which we had before the Committee. I remember that rollercoaster ride and my right hon. Friend should be congratulated on that work.

Let us be clear what the impact of the lack of beneficial ownership registers is. Others have touched on security, but I wish to talk about the tax that is lost. We are in a cost of living crisis, there is a huge pressure on the Exchequer and we have an election looming, with each party that is likely to be in government wanting to make promises to the electorate. This money is being hidden away without people knowing where it is and that is definitely having an impact on the tax take; it is an absolute opportunity for tax avoidance and tax evasion, in particular, and it is key that we have this register. In my constituency, a lot of properties are owned by offshore companies, some of them in the overseas territories, and it is impossible for the residents of those buildings to know who their landlord truly is; they face an address with no name attached, and no responses come from those landlords. It is against natural justice for people who have their homes owned by others as finance vehicles not to be able to have access to them.

We need to make sure that this issue is dealt with, because if we do not deal with the issues of money laundering and economic crime across the piece, and we deal with them only domestically, without a strategy for the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, there is a risk that the problem will simply move, rather than be resolved. People with money and advice about where to hide it, if they are minded to hide it, will find ways to do that where those ways exist. This loophole needs to be closed and we have a prime opportunity, with the Foreign Secretary, the very person who, as Prime Minister, was backing that a decade ago, now sitting in the House of Lords and at the Cabinet table. He could be driving this, so I urge the Minister to speak up for his new boss.

I hope that the Minister has been given the go-ahead to give us some comfort today that this issue will finally be resolved. There are only a few weeks until the end of the year, and I hope he can give us some comfort on the timeline.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Thank you for your co-operation. For the first wind-up, I call Richard Thomson.

4.28 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Let me begin by sharing the disappointment of the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) that this debate is necessary at all. It is incredibly disappointing that the target the UK Government had of ensuring that by December 2023—the month we are in—public registers were set up for the overseas territories and Crown dependencies looks set to be missed. This debate ought to start, as in fairness it has, from a fundamental premise: public registers of beneficial ownership are a vital tool in helping to identify and therefore reduce financial crime, and to increase financial transparency.

The simple fact of knowing who owns what, who benefits from it, and where the moneys have flowed from and are flowing to all helps to identify and tackle crime of all sorts, including corruption, drug trafficking and people trafficking, as well as domestic and international tax evasion and tax avoidance. Being able to get this under control would be massively to our collective benefit, and not just from a reputational point of view, because the revenues, moneys and assets that are concealed in this way can be used to fund activities that are detrimental to national security. It would also be massively to the benefit of the rest of the world to close down options for kleptocratic “businesspeople” or politicians to strip assets from their countries and squirrel them away in untransparent jurisdictions to enrich their lifestyles. That is clearly not a good thing, and the people of those countries suffer as a consequence of that permissive environment.

Registers are a necessary but insufficient step, and there is a lot of work to be done, not just on this issue. We have heard about London’s unenviable reputation as the laundromat—I think that term was used—for some of the world’s dirty money. I remember participating in a debate earlier in my parliamentary career about similar issues that were caused by London being the laundromat for reputational issues, through the prevalence of libel tourism, the ability to use SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—and the prevalence of public affairs and public relations agencies that are willing to accept money to do such things. There is much work to be done to clean up the United Kingdom’s act in that sense.

Although the UK Government introduced a register of beneficial ownership in 2016 and have encouraged the Crown dependencies and overseas territories to follow suit, they have not done that, so far at least, despite voluntarily agreeing to do so. That is despite the UK Government using the sweet persuasion of publishing a draft Order in Council as long ago as in 2020 to require them to do so and giving them a deadline of this month, which now seems almost certain to be missed.

This is the fundamental point: if the UK wishes to seek leadership on this issue, it cannot be taken seriously as a world leader on financial transparency if it does

[Richard Thomson]

not do more, and is not seen to do more, to stop overseas territories being used as havens for individuals to evade their obligations.

It matters very much that that should happen. More than half of the shell companies exposed in the Panama papers were incorporated in UK tax havens. More than two thirds of the companies analysed by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists from the Panama papers leaks were found to be registered in the British Virgin Islands. The UK and its overseas jurisdictions are collectively responsible, through that permissiveness, for costing the rest of the world nearly \$90 billion in lost tax each year by enabling non-residents to hide their finances and avoid tax. As the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) highlighted, Tax Justice UK estimates that the UK and its network of overseas territories and Crown dependencies are responsible for some 35% of global tax losses suffered by countries around the world.

The impact that clamping down on this problem could have, not just on the public good for the UK but in many other countries around the world, is highly significant. We are often invited to believe that the biggest threat to our quality of life—[Interruption.] Excuse me. [Interruption.] Thank you very much.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank Mr Doughty for providing a cup of water, in the spirit of the Lib-Lab pact.

Richard Thomson: Lib? Well, it shows that there is perhaps a future for progressive alliances of one kind or another, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Maybe on cups of water.

Richard Thomson: Yes.

We are regularly invited to believe that the greatest threat to our public services and our quality of life comes not from a lack of resources, but from immigration. Indeed, the governing party is tearing itself to bits today over the difficulties that it has set itself in pursuit of the votes of those they believe might be influenced by such sentiments. I cannot help but feel that we would be in a significantly better place if only the Government put half the effort into clamping down on the opportunities for tax avoidance, evasion and lack of transparency as they put into telling us that there is a problem about boats.

The three countries that ranked highest in the corporate tax haven index 2021, compiled by the Tax Justice Network, were the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands and Bermuda, which is not an accolade to be proud of. Where a score of 100 is the most permissive system and zero is the least permissive, the UK itself scored a less than clever 69. Greece scored 46.4, but seven of the eight territories that scored a perfect 100—I use the word “perfect” advisedly—are British overseas territories or Crown dependencies.

The UK Government and the territory Governments held a joint ministerial council in November, but there has been no statement. Will the Minister update the House on the progress that has been made? How will that affect the December deadline?

In 2014 the Foreign Secretary, who was then Prime Minister, made a number of strides forward in addressing this issue. We on the Opposition Benches are struggling with many things, including my voice, but we can see the benefits that come from Lord Cameron’s appointment. On these matters, we very much hope that he is able to pick up where he left off when he demitted office as Prime Minister.

If not the clock, certainly my voice is telling me that it is probably time to wind things up.

Dame Angela Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that ensuring we have open and transparent registers of beneficial ownership is only the first step in dealing with what is a very well established, very difficult and growing threat?

Richard Thomson: In short, yes, I do. The registers are necessary, although they are not sufficient by themselves. Clearly, a great deal more work needs to be done.

I commend the right hon. Member for Barking for her clarity and leadership on this issue. Next time we discuss it, I hope we will be discussing how the registers are being implemented and the benefits they bring.

4.37 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): This has been a hugely useful debate on the implementation of public registers of beneficial ownership in the UK’s overseas territories and Crown dependencies. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing this crucial debate and for her tireless and unrelenting work on combating illicit finance, fighting for transparency and opposing corruption. As shadow Minister for the overseas territories, I draw attention to my declaration of interest.

We have heard some important, passionate speeches, not least from my right hon. Friend. The campaigning motivations behind her speech have been clear and transparent in what she has attempted to achieve over many years, as many hon. and right hon. colleagues have reflected on.

Important points have been made, including by my hon. Friends the Members for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), on one of the key reasons for transparency, which is understanding who owns buildings, for example, and in what way they own them. I have had the same experience in my Cardiff South and Penarth constituency, with many residents affected by fire and building safety issues having difficulty establishing who is the freeholder and how the ownership is structured.

In an equally passionate speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) clearly exposed why this matters in so many different regards. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch also explained the importance to the public purse of dealing with these matters. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) made an equally passionate speech about why this matters to our efforts against Russia and its illegal and barbarous war in Ukraine, and in relation to our responsibilities elsewhere in the world, including in Africa and many other locations.

We heard strong comments from the Father of the House, as well as from my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord). The Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), also made important points on the constitutional position of the Crown dependencies. I am no expert on the different legal opinions that have been expressed on that matter, but I have certainly had it put to me clearly by representatives of the Crown dependencies.

As Labour's shadow Minister for the UK overseas territories, I want to begin by reiterating our unwavering commitment to each member of our global British family, their sovereignty and their right to self-determination. We are committed to a respectful but candid, productive but principled partnership between the UK and each territory, and the same is true in many respects of the Crown dependencies. It was a pleasure to meet the premiers, Chief Ministers and representatives of each overseas territory earlier this month during the week of the joint ministerial council and to hear their insights, concerns and perspectives on issues from security to sovereignty, climate change to infrastructure, and constitutional relationships to this very issue of financial services and beneficial ownership.

As I have said in previous debates, we need to be careful that we do not pursue misconceptions about the overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Each territory and dependency is distinctive and unique. Many of the overseas territories do not engage in financial services, and this debate applies less to them. We must also recognise that steps have been taken and that there has been progress in some areas. Indeed, reference was made to the public register of beneficial ownership in Gibraltar, to the exchange of notes agreement, which has existed since 2017, and to a number of other steps that have been taken. I also want to acknowledge—that I have discussed this with them over the last two years—that a number of the overseas territories, and indeed Crown dependencies, have been integral to efforts on freezing Russian state and other assets since the onset of Putin's illegal and barbarous war in Ukraine.

However, Labour believes that being part of the British family comes with clear responsibilities. We share common values, obligations and principles, including a robust commitment to democracy, the rule of law and liberty, and the protection of human rights. We also believe in the advancement of good governance and in ensuring proper democratic accountability and regulation, which of course includes transparency in financial services.

The 2018 Foreign Affairs Committee report was referred to, and I note the comments in it and comments made today about the interdependence between proper regulation and transparency and our wider national security and foreign policy objectives. That is why we must respond to the calls made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking and many others today for us to tackle these issues by urgently bringing about the full implementation of public registers of beneficial ownership in the UK's overseas territories and, I hope, Crown dependencies.

Sadly, action on economic crime has been held back by years of Conservative delay and dithering. As has been referenced, we were first promised a register of

overseas ownership by Lord Cameron in 2016, and it beggars belief that we are still debating how it should be implemented.

Section 51 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 required the Secretary of State

“no later than 31 December 2020”

to

“prepare a draft Order in Council requiring the government of any British Overseas Territory that has not introduced a publicly accessible register of the beneficial ownership of companies within its jurisdiction to do so.”

Yet here we are in 2023.

We should also remember the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022, which was passed as emergency legislation in the light of the situation in Ukraine and the need to sanction Russian state entities and others involved in the invasion. Its primary purpose included setting up a register of overseas entities and their beneficial owners and requiring overseas entities that own land in the UK to register in certain circumstances.

We have repeatedly been clear that overseas entities should not be able to hide behind trusts, and it is important to explain why that matters. A recent article by Advani, Poux and Summers from the London School of Economics tells us that

“63 per cent of cases where beneficial ownership is not publicly reported”

involve “the use of trusts”. It also states:

“The Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories are...heavily implicated here. Over 85 per cent of all trust arrangements come from...Jersey (32 per cent), Guernsey (25 per cent), British Virgin Islands (17 per cent) and Isle of Man (11 per cent).”

Russia's invasion of Ukraine only highlighted why we need to see who owns what and in a way that is transparent and publicly available.

We have made clear time and again the need to bring forward much-needed reforms to Companies House, alongside a review of the register of overseas entities, to ensure that the right balance is struck between privacy and the public interest, including our ability, for example, to apply sanctions effectively. Here in the UK I am afraid we have been playing a game of catch-up. We need to move forward in that respect, working co-operatively with the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies, but taking action if it has not yet been forthcoming.

The views of the British public are clear. The results of a poll for the UK Anti-Corruption Coalition show that 72% of the British public believe that the Government should take more responsibility, working with offshore financial centres to tackle money laundering and tax evasion. That will require the opening up of corporate registries to public scrutiny, and for the end-of-year deadline to be met as a matter of priority. We are seeing, as never before, a confluence of the need to ensure good governance across financial centres and our own national security.

Let me ask the Minister some questions. First, will the deadline be met—yes or no? If not, what do the FCDO and the wider Government consider to be a reasonable deadline, and what will be done to meet it? Can he clarify the position in relation to the Crown dependencies in particular, given the comments that have been made today? Obviously I have seen the statement that they have made about coming forward with a public commitment—I think that was the phrase—in relation

[Stephen Doughty]

to their approach to access to information on registers of beneficial ownership by the end of December 2023, to replace the 2019 commitment.

I was pleased to read the Joint Ministerial Council's communiqué, which said that

"the Overseas Territories and the UK...will be establishing a technical working group on beneficial ownership...and...the implementation of publicly accessible registers".

What is happening about that, and what support is being given to smaller territories, in particular, to enable them to make progress? What is the group doing, and how will it move forward and actually deliver results? After the November JMC, the Minister pledged that he would report to Parliament before the recess on the progress toward the deadline. Is today that day, and can he provide a precise timeline? Could he also provide an update on the status of the draft Order in Council and the circumstances in which it would be invoked? Will he tell us what percentage of business covered by the 2017 exchange of notes agreement is being covered now? I understand that in 2019 it was 87%; is it now 100%, as promised? At what speed is the information being exchanged? The Cayman Islands has told us that it does it within 24 hours; is that timeline the same in every single territory?

I hope that the Minister can answer those questions today. We want to see progress as a matter of urgency, as part of a respectful, constructive but principled relationship with our overseas territories and Crown dependencies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): If the Minister can sit down by about two minutes to 5, that will allow Dame Margaret Hodge to sum up the debate.

4.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have not had a chance to say this in person until now, but thank you for your Christmas card. We know that Christmas is coming, and it is always a joy.

I am particularly grateful to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing the debate. I pay tribute to her for her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, and for her tireless campaigning on this vital issue over many years. She is respected on both sides of the House for the work that she does. This debate has involved some of the most serious and seasoned parliamentarians, respected by me and, indeed, respected throughout the House—four dames, two knights and counting. A heavyweight group of people have made a serious contribution—and I do not say that lightly; the calculation was made by one of my colleagues.

I am also grateful for the presence of the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), who is probably soon to be right hon. or something, what with all the stuff that is going on. He leads on the Crown dependencies in the Ministry of Justice and takes a keen interest in the issues affecting them and the overseas territories.

Another of the dames is also present on the Front Bench: my right hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Dame Amanda Milling), a very well-respected former overseas territories Minister.

Illicit finance is an active and growing threat to the national security of the UK family. There we have it—it has been said on both sides of the House. I am not sure we need to say much more on that particular point, but it is serious. As set out earlier this year in the UK's second economic crime plan, illicit finance fuels serious and organised crime, threatens our institutions and enables kleptocrats to establish a financial foothold.

I recognise the important work of my noble friend the Foreign Secretary—just to reassure the right hon. Member for Barking, I can feel the strength of his opinion on my shoulders right now. That also goes for my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is the development Minister and Minister for Africa, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who is the Security Minister. I think they are well known to the right hon. Lady, and the strength of their opinions is known to her and the House, and to many others too.

This is an important and serious debate. The UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies have a history of working together as partners to strengthen our economic defences against illicit finance. Publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership are an essential tool in that fight. We want greater transparency, and we are working hard to deliver it. As has been said, the UK implemented our own register in 2016, the first of its kind in the world. The Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 set out Parliament's desire for the overseas territories to introduce registers, and in response, all the inhabited territories and Crown dependencies made public commitments to do so.

The UK welcomed those commitments as demonstrations of our joint desire to meet the highest standards in tackling illicit finance. In 2020 we set out in written ministerial statements our expectation that the territories and dependencies would implement registers by the end of this year, and included a draft Order in Council. We then provided technical assistance and support, and we saw OTs make significant progress. For instance, BVI was able to pass appropriate primary legislation in 2022 and the Cayman Islands in 2023, and the CDs have also taken a set of preparatory steps—[*Interruption.*] Bless you—it could be catching.

It will not have escaped Members' notice that only Gibraltar currently has an operational register, as was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Sir Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee. The other thing is that, as those who are following the calendar have noted, there are only three weeks to go until the end of 2023.

Let me be absolutely clear: this is not where the UK Government wanted the OTs and CDs to be. In November last year the Court of Justice of the European Union issued a ruling pertaining to publicly accessible registers, which changed the international context. The judgment found that an EU requirement to implement publicly accessible registers was contrary to the EU charter of fundamental rights. The UK was, however, satisfied with the lawfulness of our own publicly accessible register, and we continue to believe that CDs and OTs could legally

implement public registers of their own. Not only that, but no fewer than 14 EU member states allow public access to their beneficial ownership registers even after the November court ruling. That should provide a direction of travel and a sense of security.

We have been in intense discussions with the territories and dependencies since spring—it has been a huge priority for me in recent months, since my appointment as Minister for the overseas territories—to set out the rationale for our view that the registers can indeed be fully implemented in line with the privacy rights that apply to each of them. Montserrat, the Falkland Islands, St Helena, Ascension, Tristan da Cunha and Pitcairn have confirmed that they are continuing to implement theirs, following in the footsteps of Gibraltar, which introduced its own in 2020. However, Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands, along with the Crown dependencies, continue to have concerns in the light of the court ruling.

Given the differing views on the ruling, we are working together to find ways to make positive progress, including by discussing an interim step that would make significant progress towards commitments to improve corporate transparency: the implementation, next year, of publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership with a legitimate interest access filter. That would allow access to beneficial ownership information for members of the public with a legitimate interest, such as media and civil society organisations involved in the fight against illicit finance and money laundering. It would also bring the territories and dependencies in line with the EU, as the European court judgment notes that EU member states must continue to enable access to those with legitimate interest.

Dame Angela Eagle *rose*—

David Rutley: I will make one more point and then I will gladly give way.

The right hon. Member for Barking raised an issue regarding requests by Transparency International to HMRC. I cannot comment on individual cases, but if she writes to me, I will follow it up. To be clear, the Government's policy is that, by definition, legitimate interest should include civil society organisations such as Transparency International.

Dame Angela Eagle: The legitimate public interest filter, as the Minister calls it, stands or falls on how “legitimate public interest” is defined. At the moment, it appears to be far too narrowly defined, which undermines the purpose of the transparency. Will he take into account the fact that the filter, as it exists, does not let any light through and is rendering the openness of the list moot?

David Rutley: That is not the intention. We want the light to shine on these issues. That will involve media and non-governmental organisations too. I can give the hon. Lady that reassurance.

Sir Julian Lewis *rose*—

David Rutley: I will give way and then I will wind up very quickly.

Sir Julian Lewis: Surely, the problem is that if the Minister were correct and any legitimate media could make an inquiry, any citizen with a real interest could go to the media and get the information that way. That must be known in opting for the filter, so presumably its purpose is only to be obstructive and to create legal barriers.

David Rutley: The filter is fundamental to the EU's plans. We want this to be important in and of itself, and also a step on the journey to having full beneficial ownership registers. That remains the case.

I am conscious of time, but I want to assure the House that we are absolutely clear that we want to take this interim step further. We will continue active discussions. The majority of the five territories that we have talked about will sign up to the legitimate interest access filter, and we will continue to have discussions with other jurisdictions that need to do more. As I set out in my response to the right hon. Member for Barking, I intend to update the House with full details before Christmas, and I will lay a written ministerial statement on the outcomes of the ongoing negotiations.

We are continuing further productive discussions with Crown dependencies. In line with the overseas territories, we are recognising our different legal positions following the court judgment, but we are making our expectation clear that the registers need to be implemented during the course of next year. Again, the Home Office will update Parliament before the recess on the outcomes of those serious discussions, as we want to move forward.

In conclusion, I would like to give our great friends in the overseas territories and Crown dependencies the message that we are determined and keen to achieve this important goal for us all. The train is leaving the station. We know the direction of travel. It is time for all our friends in the overseas territories and CDs to get on board. We will do all we can to support them, and it remains a clear priority.

4.58 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge: What has been great about this debate is that we mostly agree across the House. That has been the basis on which we have taken action down the years, and I am grateful for that. I want to acknowledge the teamwork that has gone on. The right hon. Members for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) both played a key role in pursuing transparency in the run-up to 2018 and beyond, before they became Ministers. Transparency is just one tool in the fight against economic crime, corruption, and tax evasion and avoidance.

I thank all the Members who have taken part in the debate. My hon. Friends the Members for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) both mentioned the eye-watering sums of money that are lost to the legitimate system through tax avoidance, tax evasion and other ways.

May I thank everybody and finally say—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Violent Crime and Antisocial Behaviour: Carshalton and Wallington

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

5 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): May I begin by expressing how devastated I am that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not here to intervene on me? I have heard that that is a staple of Adjournment debates, but I fear that I will miss out on the opportunity. Nevertheless, I will soldier on and do what I can.

I would like to address a growing concern in our community of Carshalton and Wallington: violent crime and antisocial behaviour, which demands our attention and is a huge concern to my constituents. I am delighted that my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), is the Minister responding today, because he will know about many of these issues already. I am also delighted to be joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who will know full well about some of the issues I plan to raise. I will start with a few recent examples of violent crime and antisocial behaviour in the constituency.

On 3 October, a man was fatally stabbed in Roundshaw, just a week after a tragic stabbing in the neighbouring borough of Croydon, which I know the Minister is aware of as the constituency MP for the area. That followed a number of recent attacks, not all of which took place in my constituency—some occurred in neighbouring Croydon, including the tragic case of a 15-year-old girl—involving several of the many teenagers who have been killed on London's streets in 2023. Each one is a tragedy.

In Wallington, a man sustained a thankfully non-life-threatening chest wound and a woman suffered a hand injury in a knife attack on Birchwood Avenue last Saturday. I thank the police for their work. They always respond with the utmost professionalism, and they do a fantastic job. I also thank the air ambulance and NHS staff who cared for the victims. However, such incidents are of concern, because the London borough of Sutton, which includes Carshalton and Wallington, has long enjoyed a reputation as one of the safest in London, often competing with Richmond. Violent crime is not something we are necessarily used to, so seeing it happen on our streets over the course of the last few months is of real concern.

Like the inboxes of many of my colleagues across the capital, my inbox is often full of correspondence from residents, concerned parents and others who feel vulnerable and unsafe because of the crime that is happening in their area. It must not be allowed to continue. I vividly remember one constituent writing to me after the attack in Roundshaw to say that she did not feel safe enough to put her bins out in the dark. Another's teenage daughter did not want to leave the house for fear of being attacked. We must not let that become the new normal in London—or anywhere, for that matter.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. We have had the sad news of the fatal stabbing of a 17-year-old boy

outside Sutton station, and a 15-year-old was recently killed in the Minister's town of Croydon. Not only do we have to lean into knife crime, which is sometimes imported into Sutton; we also need to make sure that we can bring down the fear of crime. Often it is imported by gangs, but it is really important that we can reassure people that the police are there and that we have a holistic view of knife crime in Sutton.

Elliot Colburn: Absolutely; I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that intervention. He is absolutely right about the need to bring down the fear of crime and introducing measures to do that, and I would like to hear more from the Minister about what steps the Home Office is taking in that respect. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about providing reassurance, and I will go into that in a bit more detail. I pay tribute to him for his time as one of the longest-serving Ministers for London, and for the work he did in this space. He has been a fantastic champion of his constituency and the capital, and he is a great loss to the Government, but I am pleased to have him back on the Back Benches helping me to advocate for our fantastic borough of Sutton.

On 30 October—just a few weeks ago—a 15-year-old boy who was minding his own business was approached by another teenage boy, who led him to a block of flats, where three other teenagers armed with knives awaited. The young victim was robbed of his phone. That incident was one of many that underscores the vulnerability of our youth and the audacity of those who will prey on our children. Our children's minds should be free to explore and not be occupied with threats to their lives, but, sadly, that was not an isolated incident.

Our community has witnessed rises in house break-ins and people trying car doors. One of the most common things that I see on social media is Ring doorbell footage of people trying car doors or front doors late at night in our community. That really makes people feel violated and scared in their own homes, and that cannot be right. These doorbell cameras deter crime in their own right. I often encourage my constituents to get them, because thankfully I have seen many videos where someone has clocked a Ring doorbell camera and turned away from the house. That is fantastic, but it is awful how often such footage comes up on social media.

Another fairly distressing incident was that of a four-year-old child who was slapped at a bus stop just a couple of weeks ago. Though details are still emerging, and I do not want to prejudice investigations in any of the cases I raise, that incident underscores the urgency with which we must tackle the root causes of knife crime and antisocial behaviour in our community. No child, no parent and no person should be left with the weight of that trauma or left feeling unsafe in their own community.

In our area in the last year, thefts are up by 31%, sexual offences are up by 43% and robberies are up by 58%. Those statistics are alarming—and more so because they are not part of a national trend. Across the whole of the United Kingdom, crime has fallen since 2010—the Minister will want to expand on the Government's record in bringing crime down—so we must ask ourselves why it is only within London that we do not see that trend being played out. Some responsibility—in fact, I would argue quite a lot—must rest on the shoulders of the police and crime commissioner for London, who also happens to be the Mayor of London.

We have seen London benefit from the massive increase in police officers—we met our manifesto commitment of 20,000 new police officers, and 3,666 of those are working on the streets of London—yet we see this worrying trend with crime levels. Even just this past week, the Mayor of London was caught out misleading Londoners on statistics about crime in London. He may not be prepared to put the work in and would rather spend his time jetting off around the world trying to sell his book, legalise weed or whatever it is he is interested in doing other than getting on with his job. However, we cannot leave criminals to take over the streets of London, so I would really like to understand what work the Home Office is doing with the Metropolitan police to recapture the trust of Londoners and get on with the job of deterring and catching criminals, ensuring that our constituents—those of the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam, and mine—are kept safe.

I absolutely welcome the increase in police numbers, but we face unique challenges on the fringes of London, from which a significant number of officers are regularly transferred away for major events in central London, where help is needed for policing, leaving only a minimal presence in outer London. I would like to hear a bit more from the Minister on the work that he is doing in the Home Office with the Metropolitan police to address that promptly so that when big events happen in central London, neighbourhood and local policing in outer London does not suffer.

Collaboration between the police and local communities is also paramount, and policing is only half the battle. I absolutely want to continue advocating for an increased police presence. We all want to see bobbies back on the beat, and it is great to see those new police officers getting out there in our communities and doing just that, but we must also tackle the causes of crime and antisocial behaviour along the way. Education is a crucial step in doing that. We have seen how that has worked in other parts of the world, and even here in the United Kingdom. Glasgow was once the most violent city in the whole of Europe. It took a different approach to violent crime, and has turned that reputation around and driven down that number.

In London, we were promised a violence reduction unit that would tackle knife crime in a similar way, yet we have seen no results from that violence reduction unit. There is little transparency about who sits on it and what work they are doing, whether they have met, what they have spoken about and when they meet. The violence reduction unit for London has not achieved anything because, as I said earlier, London is not following the national trend for crime at the moment.

The challenges that we face are daunting, but the spirit of our community is always resilient. We must do all that we can to tackle violent crime and anti-social behaviour and reclaim the safety and security of my constituents in Carshalton and Wallington, and across the whole of London. We need to ensure that we have a constant and visible police presence on the streets of Sutton. We need to ensure that people are aware of the consequences of criminal activity, and educate them to prevent their turning to crime in the first place, particularly our young people. I will not stop raising these issues, and nor will my hon. Friends, because until no one lives in fear, our community thrives, and people value and protect each other, we will not have achieved our aims.

5.11 pm

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

It is a pleasure to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn). I congratulate him on securing this Adjournment debate, and on his extremely powerful and eloquent speech, which furthers his tireless campaigning on this issue, often in partnership with his constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who has contributed already this evening.

This is an incredibly important topic. I say that not just as the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire, but as the constituency neighbour, on the other side, of my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington. I am a fellow south-London MP, so I, too, see at first hand the effect of knife crime and serious violence on our communities. In particular in Croydon, but I think across all of south London, we felt for the family of Elianne Andam, the 15-year-old girl who was brutally murdered on the morning of 27 September. The whole community was incredibly moved and mourns her loss. I went to her funeral with many others. About 1,000 people attended that funeral, just a few weeks ago. It had a profound impact on the whole borough, and more widely across south London, and we all need to redouble our efforts to end the scourge of knife crime and serious violence.

Although serious violence is down by 25% over the last four years, and even though homicide has reduced this year compared with last year and is lower than it was in 2010, every single death, and every single incident of serious violence or homicide, is an individual tragedy, and we need to do more to get the figures down even further. On the Government's work in this area, we have delivered record police numbers, with 149,566 across England and Wales—more police than we have ever had before. That includes more police than we have ever had across London, in the Metropolitan Police.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington pointed out, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, as London's police and crime commissioner, has been pretty deficient in managing the police force. Although there are record numbers in the Met thanks to Government funding, there could have been an extra 1,089 officers. Government funding was available to recruit those officers to the Met, but the Mayor of London, thanks to his ineptitude, failed to recruit them. Knife crime in London has also increased on his watch. He shamefully made a claim to the contrary and was publicly rebuked by the Office for National Statistics for making misleading claims. Clearly, the Mayor of London needs to do a lot more to tackle knife crime.

Let me set out some of the things that the Government are doing in this area. One of them is funding violence reduction units across the 20 police force areas where violent crime is the most serious. Those violence reduction units, which are managed by the police and crime commissioners but are funded by the Government, are designed to make early interventions to identify people—often young people—who are on the wrong track and try to put them on the right track, whether that is through educational interventions, social services work, sporting activity or whatever it may be. We intend to continue supporting and expanding the work of violence reduction units, supported by the Youth Endowment Fund, which has received £200 million of Government money.

[Chris Philp]

We also want to stop the supply of knives getting on to our streets in the first place. That is why we are legislating, both through the Criminal Justice Bill and through secondary legislation, to: ban certain zombie knives and machetes that are currently legal; double the sentence for selling knives to under-18s; and give the police additional powers to seize legal knives that are held in private if they think those knives are going to be used for criminal purposes. As for selling knives online, the Online Safety Act 2023—which received Royal Assent just a few weeks ago—will, when fully in force, require online marketplaces such as Facebook Marketplace to proactively prevent the sale of illegal knives online, again choking off the supply of those knives into our communities.

Elliot Colburn: Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to three people? First, Ray and Vi Donovan are an incredible couple living in my constituency who helped bring a knife bin to the centre of Sutton—some truly horrific things have been found in that knife bin, but thankfully, they are off the streets. Secondly, as the Minister mentioned the Online Safety Act, will he join me in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who was the Minister who took that Act through Parliament in its final stages and managed to secure that important measure to stop knives being sold?

Chris Philp: I certainly join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to his constituents and their work on the knife bin—we need to have more of those around—and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam did indeed take the Online Safety Bill through its concluding stages in the House of Commons. I was involved in an earlier stage of that Bill's passage, but he was the Minister who, after a number of years and a number of Ministers, got it over the line.

It is also important to take action on the streets, and although it sometimes attracts controversy, stop and search is an important way of getting knives off our streets. Each month, the Metropolitan police takes about 400 knives off the street through stop and search, which is an important part of the police's arsenal when done lawfully and respectfully. I would like to see the police be more proactive, using stop and search more—using it more confidently and more widely—to get those knives off the street. Some people raise concerns about disproportionality, but if we look at the success rate for finding knives or drugs on those people who are stopped and searched, the percentage of stop and searches resulting in a find of knives or drugs—which is typically between

25% and 28%—is virtually exactly the same across all ethnic groups. That suggests that allegations that the police are behaving unfairly are without foundation, so I would like to see stop and search used more.

The Home Office is also investing in the development of technology that will be able to covertly scan for knives as people walk down the street. That technology is a year or so away from being deployable, but it is something we are investing in, and it is something I would like to see deployed on our streets. We are also investing in hotspot patrolling: through a project called Grip, hotspot patrols take place in areas where serious violence is a particular problem. We are also running antisocial behaviour hotspot patrols in some force areas. Those hotspot patrols will be rolled out across the whole country from next April—we found that where they take place, antisocial behaviour and serious violence drop noticeably, so we are going to be increasing funding for hotspot patrols across the country from April.

Finally, I draw the House's attention to the importance of catching perpetrators, and of using technology to do so. My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned the availability of CCTV footage these days: a lot of images are now available, whether that is CCTV footage from shops or local authorities, Ring doorbells in people's houses, dashcam footage or footage taken on mobile phones. The facial recognition algorithm that the police can run, which takes an image of a criminal committing a crime from any of those things—CCTV, mobile phones and so on—and runs it through the police database, can now produce remarkably accurate matches even when the image is not particularly clear. I therefore urge all police forces to redouble their efforts to always run those images through the police national database and to do the facial recognition search. The evidence so far suggests that many perpetrators who would previously not have been caught now can be caught using retrospective facial recognition, which is what I have described.

I thank again my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington for securing this debate. It is a really important topic not just in south London or London more widely, but across the whole country. A lot of progress has been made, but there is more to do. Every single injury or death is a tragedy and all of us in Parliament and in Government must work together with the police and others to ensure that we do everything humanly possible to end the scourge of knife crime, which is far too frequent at the moment.

Question put and agreed to.

5.20 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 7 December 2023

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UN Convention on Genocide

1.30 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on Genocide.

It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve with you as Chair of the proceedings, Ms McDonagh. It is a long time since I have engaged in this art form.

I will begin by expressing my regret that the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) cannot be with us today; unfortunately, he is not well. He was the co-sponsor, along with me, of at least part of this debate, and I count him as a good ally on matters concerning human rights. The hon. Member for Henley leads the UK delegation to the Assembly of the Council of Europe, which gives him prominence in the human rights debate.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I join the hon. Member for Rochdale in expressing our dismay at my hon. Friend the Member for Henley not being here to speak on a subject on which, as the hon. Gentleman generously said, he is extremely expert. I am sure that the whole House would want to wish him a speedy recovery.

Tony Lloyd: I will pass the Minister's words on to the hon. Member; I think we would all agree on that.

On a happier note, we meet today to celebrate the fact that it is now some 75 years since two important universal documents appeared. The universal declaration of human rights was brought into being on 10 December 1948, and, of course, there was the equivalent declaration on genocide. I shall not trespass on to the genocide declaration, because my identical twin, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), will speak on that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Not completely identical.

Tony Lloyd: Some identical twins differ more than others; that is all I will say. Nevertheless, he will speak on that declaration with great knowledge.

The only thing that I will say about the genocide declaration is that it is sometimes very narrowly interpreted as being concerned solely with the partial extermination—the killing—of populations when, in fact, it is much broader than that. It is very important both in the way that the public perceive it and in creating a legal base for many other activities. I will begin by saying what a tremendous thing it was that the United Nations was able to bring that together. It was very much influenced by Eleanor Roosevelt, the spouse of President Roosevelt.

It was particularly important because the world had just lived through the most astonishing atrocities: the dehumanisation of the individual, with six million Jews killed in the death camps along with untold numbers of gypsies, gay people and Slavs. Even though those were Hitler's evil crimes, it is, perhaps, worth quoting Stalin, who said that one death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic. That chilling comment almost summarises what took place during the second world war and how those in the generation that brought into being the universal declaration were able instead to say, "No, we are not prepared to accept that; each human being is valid in their own right".

The preamble to the universal declaration of human rights says:

"Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".

That is the rights of "all members", without consideration of gender or any other of what we would now regard as protected characteristics. In that context, this was a major change in attitude to the concentration on the individual.

As a slightly barbed comment, I will just say that we even heard in the main Chamber recently a Minister talking about the situation in Gaza and Palestine and saying that the killing of Palestinians was a "by-product". That may have been an infelicitous use of words, but it is the kind of verbal usage that we must be very careful to guard against, because the life of every individual must be treated as being valid, which is exactly what the universal declaration of human rights reminds us of.

Of course, in this era we can ask, "Has the universal declaration been a success or a failure?" Its level of aspiration is extraordinary: prohibition of discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex or religion; the right to life and liberty; the prohibition of slavery; prohibition of torture; prohibition of arbitrary arrest, detention and exile; the right to a fair trial; freedom of religion; freedom of expression; freedom of assembly and association; the right to work, which interestingly includes the right to equal pay for equal work and the right to form or join a trade union; and the right to education.

Referring back to equal pay for equal work, it took another two and a half decades before our country even legislated on that issue, when Barbara Castle brought in the equal pay legislation. However, the universal declaration of human rights was developed back in the 1940s, so this profound declaration established the principle of equal pay for equal work.

If we look across the nations of the world, it is not that difficult to be dismayed in this era by the breaching of the commitments that many countries have made to the universal declaration of human rights. I will run through some of those countries; I know that other hon. Members will have other countries that they prefer to talk about.

Let us take the situation in Syria. A terrible war has taken place there, and now 2.4 million children have no access to education and 55% of Syrians are food-insecure. Both of those things are in contravention of articles of the declaration.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, we know about the unlawful killing of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi embassy in Ankara. That still screams out as an abuse by the Saudi

[Tony Lloyd]

authorities. And of course Raif Badawi is a Saudi blogger and activist who has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for creating an online forum for public debate, and he now faces a 10-year travel ban after his release.

In Iran, the debate about the right of a woman to choose whether or not to wear the hijab, or the scarf was put to the test by the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. She died in police custody after being severely beaten and tortured. That led to literally millions of people protesting to challenge the Iranian regime's actions. The result was that 19,000 people were arrested and 551 people were killed.

Oddly, of course, while the Iranians want to dictate that women should wear the veil or scarf in certain circumstances, in France the hijab is banned under certain circumstances, in contravention of these rights that I am discussing.

Russia is now a major abuser of rights. In the Bucha massacre—let us say genocide—in Ukraine, 450 people were murdered, and mass rape and torture took place. In addition, 16,000 Ukrainian children have been kidnapped; only 300 of them have been returned from Russia or, possibly, Belarus. There is also the case of Arshak Makichyan, a climate activist who is charged with terrorism; he has also been stripped of his Russian citizenship and left stateless.

In Serbia, we know that the attacks in northern Kosovo, including the so-called Banjska attack in October this year, were planned by armed Serbian militants, but they were almost certainly organised by Milan Radoičić, who has strong links to the Serbian president. In Serbia, of course, they continue to deny the genocide that took place in a previous era.

On a different continent, in the Philippines unlawful killings have been carried out under the war on drugs, which was launched by former President Duterte. It is believed that maybe over 6,000 people were killed during that period. I met a Filipino priest this week who cannot return to the Philippines because he would be charged by an army officer who wanted to indict him for the criticisms he made of that army officer.

I could go on, with many more cases in Colombia. We know that 182 killings of human rights and environmental defenders took place there in the previous calendar year. There is legislation to protect those defenders, but it is not implemented. Impunity is a major problem.

I will not go through every country in the world, but I want to touch on one or two others. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, war has been endemic for many years: mineral wealth is stolen by the DRC's neighbours, but routine torture of its citizens also takes place. I met an asylum seeker this week who was granted asylum and now lives in this country as a refugee. In Zimbabwe, arbitrary arrest takes place. In Mali, the Malian and allied security forces have been implicated in hundreds of unlawful killings. There is also no doubt that in India, systematic discrimination against and stigmatisation of religious and other minorities, particularly Muslims, is endemic. In January, photographs of 100 Muslim women, including journalists and activists, were displayed on an app that said they were for sale, in order to humiliate and intimidate them; in October, police in Gujarat publicly flogged Muslim men accused of disrupting

a Hindu festival; and in Indian-occupied Kashmir, the actions of the Indian authorities are outrageous. Those very often slip through the net of things to which we are able to pay attention.

I cannot fail to mention the situation at the moment in the middle east with Israel and Gaza. The attacks on Jewish women and the level of brutality meted out by Hamas scream out against everything we believe in. We need to condemn Hamas and the activists who perpetrated those attacks. Equally, however, I have to condemn the actions of the Israeli forces when we see the denial of food and water and of power to hospitals, which, again, are in breach of Israel's convention obligations. Across the world, there is a pattern of abuse that is both tragic and, perhaps more legalistically, in gross contempt of those countries' obligations.

The challenges come closer to those who were the driving forces for the universal declaration. The United States is not free of criticism. We have seen people arrested without charge and without process in Guantanamo Bay, for example. Again, the world ought to pay attention to that. In the United States, the right to health is rationed by the power of the dollar, so the poor do not have access to their declaration rights to health. The death penalty—both the so-called legal death penalty and the death penalty sometimes at the hands of the police and other forces—is also something that shames America.

In case people think I am ignoring our own country, we have not ratified the protection for migrant women under the Istanbul convention, for example. We really need to begin to move on that. We have made laws that allow us to strip individuals of their citizenship, leaving them stateless. That cannot be right and is contrary to convention rights. The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 will almost certainly come before the European Court of Human Rights—it needs to do so—because it offers de facto an amnesty from prosecution for the most serious crimes of murder and unlawful killing. Last night, we heard the Home Secretary's view that he could declare by statute Rwanda to be a safe country. I remind Members that the United States State Department described Rwanda as a country whose human rights breaches include unlawful killing and the use of cruel and discriminatory policies, including torture. By any standards that does not make Rwanda, even by statute, a safe country.

Mr Mitchell: One must be careful when talking about Rwanda, a country I know extremely well. This is a country that, in the last 30 years, suffered a genocide where 1 million people were killed in 90 days. It is an extraordinary success story of a country that has lifted itself up from the very depths to be one of the safest and most stable countries in Africa today. Do not forget either that, dealing with the aftermath of a genocide, the Gacaca court system was incredibly successful at processing people who had committed murder in their hundreds of thousands and reintegrating them back into society. That is an extraordinary and pretty much unprecedented achievement.

Tony Lloyd: I have also visited Rwanda and met the same President the Minister will have spoken to. I recognise where Rwanda has come from, but I also recognise that in any journey we expect progress. The US Department of State's critique is real and we ought to take it into

consideration, in particular when we seek, by statute, to declare Rwanda to be a “safe” country. We can argue about the history, but we need to look at the present as well. There are still some unsavoury things—unsavoury is a kind word—that take place in Rwanda and we should recognise that.

Mr Mitchell: I do not want to prolong the debate at this point on Rwanda, but in the opinion of the British Government, and more widely, it is indeed a safe country. The hon. Gentleman may or may not know this, but if we look at the statistics Kigali is a safer city than London.

Tony Lloyd: Well, I am a Mancunian and we have different views on these things. I shall be leaving London sometime this evening, and not to go to Kigali.

What we must acknowledge is that a debate is taking place in the Minister’s party about the relevance of international law. I hope it will conclude that, as a nation, we are better protected when we are a part of collective security and collective law. To describe the European Court of Human Rights as a foreign court is unhelpful. It is not a foreign court; it is a court that we helped to establish. I hope the fact that there is a debate will ensure that we recommit to the values of the universal declaration of human rights.

On the positive side—I have gone through some of the negatives—the universal declaration has been the foundation of international human rights law. Nine binding treaties stem from it and the majority of United Nations members have signed up to four or more of them, so international human rights law exists and is now actionable, sometimes through national legislation, as we have in our own country, and sometimes through other bodies, such as the European Court of Human Rights. The international covenant on civil and political rights guarantees the right to life and equality before the law. The international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights provides for the right to freedom of expression and the right to work, to social security and to education—all very important freedoms and rights. We also have the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and those who have been involved know how important that is.

Around the world, we have seen the expansion of concern—particularly in this country, but in others as well it has to be said—of non-governmental organisations. I will not name them all, but we had a number of them in Parliament this week, ranging from Amnesty International to country-specific NGOs. We recognise the growth of human rights and environmental defenders around the world, and—I mentioned the hon. Member for Henley—the important role of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Council of Europe system itself in underpinning human rights in this country.

There is no doubt that the universal declaration has been a success. Here in our own Parliament, many structures and bodies are devoted to human rights, but there are challenges, which I put to the Minister in the hope that he will respond, including that defenders of human rights and the environment are under enormous pressure all around the world. They are killed, or they are charged with artificial crimes. We know about that pressure. We, as a country, should defend the defenders of human rights and the environment.

I was a Minister in the Foreign Office in my time, so I know how difficult it is to engage in human rights conversations. I had the delight of talking to President Milošević in his day, when he was about to murder Kosovans—I do not remember him being very responsive to my entreaties on human rights, so I recognise how difficult it can be. Nevertheless, there is a moral and practical obligation on our Government to ensure that the case for human rights is embedded in everything that our Foreign Office does, including striking trade deals. It must show concern about environmental protections and workers’ rights. We must recognise when striking security deals, including those involving the transfer of arms or technologies such as surveillance equipment, that such hardware can be used for the wrong purposes.

We know with near certainty that Yemenis have been carpet-bombed using weapons made in this country. We must take that on board.

I also ask the Minister to follow the model of the Bribery Act 2010 and seriously consider the establishment of mandatory supply chain due diligence to protect the human rights of those working in supply chains, as well as protect the environment that supply chains can put under pressure.

Finally, I think the Minister will definitely be on board with my final suggestion, because it is implicit in his own White Paper. We need to get upstream on these things to ensure that we are building capacity around human rights defenders and environmental defenders, on issues such as impunity and on issues such as environmental protections more generally. In the end, we must build capacity to ensure that crisis does not automatically lead to violence. Those would be enormous gains. I pay tribute to the Minister for being on the more endearing end of the Government—I apologise to the Minister; he will never live that down. I nevertheless look forward to a positive response to our demands, which ought to strike favour as we celebrate the establishment of the universal declaration of human rights.

1.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be in a tag-team with the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd). I had hoped that perhaps those with a bigger interest in human rights issues around the world would be here but, for whatever reasons, they are not. That is disappointing, because I think they would have added a lot to the debate. That said, I am pleased that a number of dedicated right hon. and hon. Members always attend these debates. It is a pleasure to work alongside them.

I am also pleased to see the Minister in his place. I think we all look forward to his contribution—I do personally—because we are all of the opinion that his heart is in the same place as our hearts and that we are trying to achieve the same goals. Perhaps we on this side of the Chamber wish there was greater urgency.

I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) in his place. He and I have been on a number of visits to study, speak up for and better understand human rights issues, so it will be a real pleasure to hear from him.

I am very pleased to see the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) in her place. When she came into the Chamber earlier today, I gesticulated to her as if to say,

[Jim Shannon]

“Are you going to Westminster Hall?” and she nodded her head. I was not sure whether she knew what the question was, but we are pleased to see her here.

I will speak about Pakistan. The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) is here, and she and I had the opportunity to visit Pakistan in February. Some of the things that we experienced and learned were encapsulated in a report, and I will speak about some of them.

This Saturday marks the 75th anniversary of the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. How often have we had to refer to genocide in the House over the years, whether in Westminster Hall or the main Chamber? It happens regularly. Although the word is not used often, that is not because it is not the right word but because it is the right word. When we use the word “genocide”, it sums up exactly what is happening, and some of the things the hon. Member for Rochdale referred to and some that I will speak to will confirm that. The convention is a promise from the international community that such crimes should never happen again—wow, if only they never happened again, but unfortunately they do. The convention serves as the basis of all atrocity prevention efforts in international law, and I am proud of the UK’s role in helping to draft the convention. Whenever things are good and right, we should say so; if they need changing, we also have to say so.

All Members present will know that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and they will know my passion for ensuring that that fundamental right is upheld. We speak up for those of Christian faith, those of other faiths and those with no faith, and we do that because it is right to do so. I would have been in the Chamber to speak in the islamophobia debate, but obviously I cannot be in two places at the same time. I have tried in the past to do that; indeed, it has been rumoured that I may have succeeded, but I think that is a rumour. None the less, I would have tried to be there because I very much believe in freedom of religious belief for everyone.

It will be no surprise for those close to these issues that there is a strong connection—indeed, an unparalleled, joined-at-the-hip relationship—between freedom of religion or belief and mass atrocity crimes and human rights abuses, because we have witnessed that around the world. It hurts our hearts and depresses us whenever we see what is happening, because we want to reach out and help everybody and secure their right to exist. Religious minority communities are often the target of atrocity crimes. Violations of FORB are often early warning signs of a worsening human rights outlook for a country. We should be under no illusion that if people have been abused because they are from an ethnic minority or because of their religious beliefs, human rights abuses will be part of that as well. They may be unable to get a job, excluded from education or healthcare, or even not allowed to own their own house, and a lady or young girl will not have the same liberties or freedoms in some parts of the world.

For authoritarians, FORB represents an existential threat. In other words, the very fact that a person has a religious belief or is from a minority is a threat to some authoritarians. It should not be, but it is. For states that seek to impose their ideology, the public presence of

diverse and vocal religious and belief communities is a direct challenge. As such, those communities are targeted and scapegoated and, when left unchecked, that can escalate quickly. Mass atrocities are thought of as extreme phenomena that rarely happen, but they happen regularly, unfortunately. The sad truth is that such crimes occur frequently and alarmingly and their frequency seems to be increasing.

Since the last election we have seen a coup in Myanmar leading to an escalation of attacks on Rohingya and the Taliban’s targeting of Afghanistan’s Hazara community, including women and girls as well, to an extent that grieves me greatly. The Uyghurs continue to be imprisoned in Xinjiang, and the Buddhists in Tibet and Christians in North Korea—indeed, Christians around the world, and specifically in the middle east—have been targeted.

The Hamas terrorist group’s abuse and killing of some 1,200 Israelis, and the mass rape—I find it difficult to talk about those things. I understand only too well that the paper reports are quite graphic, and some of the videos are even more graphic. Some of the things that the Hamas terrorists did to Israeli women were bestial. That is the only way I can describe it. I hope they will be made accountable for their actions.

The Baha’is in Iran are the most gentle people you will ever meet. We have probably all met them—I think we have. They are the gentlest people, so kind and so nice. Their very demeanour encourages me whenever I meet them. In Iran, they do not have the right to own land. They have no right to a job, education or healthcare. Their land and property is stolen and their graveyards, where their people are buried, are desecrated.

Those are just some of the things that happen. The situations of the Shi’as and Sunnis, the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan and the Muslims in India tell us that we live in a world that is very, very unsettled.

Examples of groups that are targeted include the Yazidis and groups in Ukraine, Sudan, Syria, Tigray, Israel, Palestine, Myanmar and Xinjiang. There are so many examples of states targeting minority religious communities, and the list I have given is far from exhaustive. The violence and hatred shown towards such groups is unacceptable in a world order that declares that human dignity is an essential and irrevocable standard—the fundamental basis of all human rights. That is what we say, but the reality seems very different.

Some of the greatest foreign policy challenges faced by the Government have been responses to atrocity crimes: the war in Ukraine, the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the situation in Israel and Gaza and the collapse of the peace process in Sudan. I mention that because there is a duty on us, our Minister and our Government to do something for them. While our foreign policy treats atrocity crimes as an exceptional phenomenon, our response as a country will always be reactive and perhaps inconsistent.

The hon. Member for Rochdale mentioned Ukraine earlier. I am conscious that if we had responded in a stronger way when Russia invaded Crimea and Donbas in the eastern region, perhaps we would not be facing the calamitous obstacles that we have to overcome today.

Nigeria is one example of an African country where Christians are abused and attacked almost on a daily basis. That is happening in north-east Nigeria and is

now creeping down into the middle of Nigeria. Middle Africa is the armoury of all of Africa. It is so flush with weapons that you could almost arm your own army from the reservoir of armaments that are available.

The hon. Member for Rochdale referred to the attacks in the Philippines; I asked a business question about an attack there just last week on a Roman Catholic mass, where four parishioners were murdered and many more were injured. Atrocities are growing around the world, and radicalisation seems to be growing. Some people—a great many people, perhaps—are unable to listen to someone else's issues and do not understand that someone might have a different religion.

When I first came to this place, I was a member of the parliamentary friends of Colombia group. The hon. Member for Rochdale referred to that country, so I want to mention it quickly. Big businesses that should know better—some have their headquarters in western countries—carry out land grabs against peasants and the lower class, and are encouraged by the police and the army. We speak for those people.

The UK is a leader on the prevention of atrocity crimes, and the Government have much to be proud of. I will set out some of the things they have done, but the Minister will know already. They committed to prioritise mass atrocity prevention in the integrated review of the 2030 foreign policy framework. Last year, a new mass atrocities prevention hub was created in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. A full overview has been carried out of the FCDO's primary tools for crisis analysis, and atrocity prevention has been integrated into several country strategies. The UK is currently championing a groundbreaking crimes against humanity treaty at the United Nations.

Despite all those successes, I believe there is still a considerable shortfall in the UK's response to the threat of atrocity crimes under the genocide convention, which places a duty on states to prevent possible genocides. Currently, the UK has no mechanism to prevent future genocides and relies on non-domestic courts such as the International Criminal Court to make a determination after crimes have been committed. That means the UK's response is retrospective and often misses the chance to prevent unfolding atrocities.

To better prevent future genocides, the UK needs a consistent response to mass atrocity crimes. We have several asks of the Government, and I know the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute will emphasise them even more strongly. Most modern atrocity crimes share similar features, such that policies can be introduced to address the causes. They are motivated or legitimised through a politics of identity-based grievance, discrimination and/or human rights deficits. There is often an organised conspiracy by either state or non-state actors, many parts of which may act through domestic legislation or be legitimised by authorities. It is frustrating to watch that happen. The actors take advantage of unchecked power, even if it is enjoyed in a limited environment, and they can escalate the situation quickly, leading to widespread violence and systematic human rights violations reaching the threshold of international atrocity crimes such as genocide or crimes against humanity. There is a stepping stone from abuse to genocide; we can see the pointers.

Mass atrocities are predictable and often preventable. Early intervention is vital if we are to have the best chance of success in stopping situations escalating to the point

of mass atrocities. In addition to the moral argument, early intervention brings with it a lower financial and diplomatic cost. One of the first tools used to prevent mass atrocities is targeted human rights sanctions. However, they are often inconsistently applied, and there is a lack of co-ordination with allies such as the US and the EU.

When dealing with states such as China and Russia, sanctions can have a significant impact on trade, but inaction also has a cost. If Russia had been more strongly challenged after it annexed Crimea in 2014, after the events in Donbas, or even during the 2008 war with Georgia, it is likely that the current war in Ukraine could have been prevented. I remember the hon. Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) speaking up strongly when those things happened. His words were prophetic, and if the west had responded harder and quicker—it has acted now—some of the things that have happened in Ukraine would not have happened. The impact of the war is the largest driver of the cost of living crisis: it has cost £60 billion in additional energy costs alone.

I pay tribute to churches and missionary groups in my constituency and, indeed, across Northern Ireland. Others will refer to their own churches. They do incredible fundraising and work with non-governmental organisations, in particular in Zimbabwe and Eswatini. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) will no doubt refer to Malawi, which he has always talked about. Those churches and groups have played a critical role. The earlier the intervention, the less harsh it needs to be; as such, intervening carries less of a diplomatic cost.

My four asks are coming up. Intervention needs to be consistent: we need to respond in the same way to the crisis in Ukraine and the situation in Sudan. I asked for an urgent question on Sudan this week; unfortunately it was not granted, although that is not a criticism. We are using this debate to highlight the issue. Without a consistent response, perpetrators will continue to feel free to act with impunity.

The way to achieve a coherent, consistent response in both domestic and international policy is for the UK—our Government, our Minister—to have a national strategy on mass atrocity crime. That is one of the main recommendations of the International Development Committee report “From Srebrenica to a safer tomorrow: Preventing future mass atrocities around the world”. It states that without concerted action, mass atrocities are likely to become more common, which will constrain global development. That is the point of this debate.

Good things have happened, but not enough of them and not to the extent of making change. We are here to speak up for those who have no voice, the voiceless in the world—our brothers and sisters who have lost their lives and families and have been abused. That is important. The UK is leading the world on its human rights policies on freedom of religion or belief and preventing sexual violence in conflict. A natural extension of those priorities would be a national strategy on mass atrocity crime. That is my ask for today.

I want to use my final few minutes to ask the Minister a few specific questions. Just last week, the US State Department made a determination that war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing were happening in Sudan. Given that the UK is a penholder for Sudan at the UN Security Council and given the targeting of places of worship in the current crisis, are we not now in a position to make a similar determination for Sudan? I ask the Minister that question directly.

[Jim Shannon]

The all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief has recently released a report following a trip to Pakistan; the hon. Member for Putney and I were at the launch just last week. It was a well-attended event at which we were made very aware of the persecution, ethnic cleansing and murder—all the things happening to Christians, Shi'as, Sikhs, Hindus and Ahmadis in Pakistan. I have no doubt that the hon. Lady will speak about that shortly. We are both happy to give the Minister a copy of that report to make sure he knows what we are talking about. We have made a number of recommendations, which I believe the Minister will endorse. It is important that he does.

Lastly, does the Minister recognise the intersection between atrocity crimes and freedom of religion or belief? What role does that intersection play within the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's new mass atrocity prevention hub? I conclude with those comments. I say gently to the Minister that we have those four asks; others will have theirs. As I said earlier, I am happy to see the Minister in his place as I believe he understands the issue. What we need is not words but actions. We have put forward some ideas about how the UK can play a greater role in respect of the UN genocide convention or the universal declaration of human rights.

4.13 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh, and to speak in this debate on the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights and the UN genocide convention. I am pleased that the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), is here to respond this afternoon. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. I also thank Dr Kate Ferguson and the whole team at Protection Approaches as well as the teams at the Aegis Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, Remembering Srebrenica and the young people from Hampton School, who have campaign called "Genocide 80/20", and who are campaigning tirelessly on preventing genocides and mass atrocities.

In the 1990s, long before being elected to this place, I worked in Bosnia during and after the war; more recently, I visited the site of the Srebrenica memorial to the genocide. I have also visited Yad Vashem in Israel and the Holodomor memorial in Kyiv, which I went to last year with other MPs.

Given that background and those visits, I am honoured to be the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity. I became chair four years ago, when I was elected—I cannot believe it has been four years—because I am so passionate about not seeing an endless train of atrocities. Some of the most important decisions that we will make as parliamentarians will be about atrocities, but when we see them it is too late for many people.

I will focus on early warning and prevention, and especially the call for a national strategy on mass atrocity crimes. This is not an abstract policy area; we have seen it with our own eyes. I have seen the real and devastating impact that hate has when it is left unchecked. The convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide was the first human rights treaty—

adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, 75 years ago this Saturday. It signified the international community's commitment to make sure that the incomprehensible horrors of the past could never be repeated. That commitment to "never again" has resounded down through those 75 years, and it must really mean something.

The convention means that the international community has committed to doing whatever it takes to make sure that the early-warning systems are in place and that there are no excuses for inaction. It sets out a definition of genocide as the

"intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

It is that special "intent" that makes it a uniquely difficult crime to determine.

While the convention was a signal of the intention of 152 states to finally end genocide once and for all, its implementation in the real world falls short of its bold ambitions, as we have seen over these 75 years. Responses are too frequently focused on acknowledging that a genocide has already occurred, and sometimes punishing those responsible. That is absolutely important—it is important that justice is seen—but it falls short of fulfilling the original intention of the genocide convention: there is not enough focus on identifying potential genocides and preventing them before they metastasise into a cancer of hate and suffering.

The APPG on the prevention of genocide, which I chair, has set out the case for the need for a consistent response to mass-atrocity crimes—a need for a national strategy. There is not enough strategic oversight from the Government to pick out those early indications or risks, or to respond to urgent warnings. Modern atrocity crimes all share very similar features and should be met with policies that address them.

I have heard people in my constituency say, "I can't watch the news at the moment—it's too much." It feels so overwhelming when we hear about all the situations happening. However, saying that there is something is similar about them—that they can be addressed early on, that they can be spotted and that action can be taken—gives power back to Governments, back to us, and to our embassies and high commissions around the world, so that we can take action.

Those broad causes can be broken down into separate elements. First, modern atrocities are often motivated or legitimised through politics of identity-based grievance, discrimination and often a lack of human rights. Secondly, they can be through an organised conspiracy by state or non-state actors. Thirdly, modern atrocities frequently arise from a group taking advantage of unchecked power. If that power remains unchecked, escalation can then take place faster than the international community can respond, leading to widespread violence and systematic human rights violations.

Those may sound like extreme and rare occurrences, but that is not the case. Across the world, mass atrocities occur much more frequently than we would like to think, and many have been raised by other members in this debate. Just look at Ukraine or the persecution of Ahmadis in Pakistan, which the hon. Member for Strangford has already referred to and which we saw when we visited Pakistan earlier this year. There is a report with many recommendations for both our Government and the Government of Pakistan, which I hope the Minister will look at and consider as well.

Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Tigray, Myanmar, Xinjiang, the Hazaras, the Yazidis, and what is happening in Israel and Palestine are all examples of ongoing atrocities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale said, we condemn the actions of Hamas against the Jews, who are living peacefully—the rape of women, the killing and hostage-taking. We also condemn the disproportionate use of force by Israel—the use of access to water, food, medicines and fuel as a weapon of war, and the forced displacement of 1.7 million people and rising. The incidence of mass atrocities is rising across the world because inequality, social fracture, democratic backsliding, resource scarcity, arms proliferation, climate change and the internationalisation of malign, non-state actors are all moving us in the wrong direction.

Although that news is deeply concerning, we know that mass atrocities are predictable and often preventable. Early intervention is the key. Not only is that more likely to succeed in saving lives, but it will have a lower financial, military and diplomatic cost as well; it is good value for money to save lives by early intervention when it is seen that atrocities are on their way to being committed. As I have said, to intervene early enough we need a coherent strategy backed up with strong political will that is consistently monitoring and responding to the causes that I have outlined. Early intervention is not good only in itself; it is fundamental to our security in the UK. Preventing mass atrocity crimes is not a nice-to-have or a concern simply for those of us committed to human rights; it is fundamental to our national security.

Let me first commend the progress made in recent years. Since I became chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity, we have been monitoring the situation closely, and we have seen progress. There is commitment to prioritising mass atrocity prevention in the integrated review and in the new 2030 foreign policy framework.

There was the creation of the new mass atrocity prevention hub, which sits in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Although it is welcome, that hub must have teeth and the scope to work across Government Departments, with clear lines of accountable political leadership with the means to prevent, mitigate, respond and punish. At the moment, we do not have an approach for how to foresee and respond to the pathologised violence of mass atrocity crimes, which is different from violent conflict. The hub must be preventive in nature, in line with the UK's commitment.

It is also encouraging to see the integration of atrocity prevention in several countries' strategies—meaning that embassies and high commissions are taking this up and taking action—and to see the UK championing a crimes against humanity treaty at the United Nations. In the international development White Paper published recently, there is a section that says that new technologies should be used to expedite the forecasting of conflict and mass atrocity risks, extending the length of time from a few months to a few years in advance, in order to buy time for response. Access to data and technology should be extended so that early warning is used more systematically across the international system. It is a good start and it is good in its own right, but it just does not go far enough; a national strategy would take that much further.

Tony Lloyd: Just a brief point, if I may. I fundamentally agree that the national strategy would move the situation forward, but we also need to internationalise this process.

We need to at least bring together like-minded nations who would be prepared to buy in to exactly the same framework.

Fleur Anderson: I wholeheartedly agree. The UK championing a crimes against humanity treaty would be one stage of that, but it needs to go further, with internationalising through many other treaties that we are involved in and in many other streams of work.

If we had an international strategy and embassies took it up consistently, we would be more enabled on the ground through different embassies working together, as they do in many countries. A national strategy must have four components; this has also been raised in the International Development Committee's report, "From Srebrenica to a safer tomorrow: Preventing future mass atrocities around the world", which concluded that there was an urgent need for the UK to adopt a national strategy for preventing and responding to atrocity crimes.

The four core components are, first, that prevention-first policy thinking should be at the centre of any strategy. That prevention-first approach must address the causes of atrocities by disrupting and dismantling the organised architecture of atrocities. Secondly, the strategy must invest in network analysis that monitors and evaluates the drivers that cause atrocities; maps potential motivations and the interrelations between perpetrators and the coalitions that can help prevent escalation; and identifies the points where leverage can be effectively applied, and which actors can do that. The paragraph in the international White Paper incorporates that.

The third part must be a more holistic approach to developing a resilient society—this is the part that I keep going on about in many meetings. It is about civil society strength, where cohesive, equitable communities, high in public trust and with strong, inclusive institutions, can limit and mitigate the damage from both internal and external shocks. When the potential for mass atrocities is building, women's groups, young people, access to better employment and jobs or support for human rights defenders and environmental protectors can be the crucial things on the ground that stop and prevent movement towards atrocities. As well as the diplomatic and military, civil society is absolutely crucial. It is like the three legs needed for the stool that will enable us to prevent atrocities.

Lastly, we need an institutionalisation that finds the right balance between integration and specialisation—this is how the mechanics of Whitehall works—to ensure that atrocity prevention is neither mainstreamed nor siloed to death. It leads to more effective action by co-ordinating, convening and unlocking responses. If we brought in this national strategy, the Minister would be free to do what is absolutely right, without being hamstrung by a lack of real political infrastructure.

The absence of a policy on atrocity prevention has left the UK ill-prepared to respond to some of the greatest foreign policy crises of our time: Sudan, Ukraine, Tigray and more that have already been mentioned. When the Government refused, over years, to acknowledge the atrocity risks rising in Sudan, the Minister here went further than most this summer to call out the atrocities in Darfur. Without policy on these crimes, however, even with his contributions the UK is unable to go further and take meaningful actions necessary to help protect people in Sudan. That is just one example. The Minister knows that the violence we are talking about,

[Fleur Anderson]

whether in Darfur or Syria, is markedly different from armed conflict and should not be responded to in the same fashion.

To conclude, we need a national strategy on mass atrocities, so that we lead international efforts to stamp out signs of atrocity wherever it raises its ugly head. We need a strategy that has political weight; that is consistent and not up to the interests of different Ministers, ambassadors or high commissioners; that is built in with early warning and identification; and that is resourced both in Whitehall and in countries. We need to ensure it supports a civil society for peace, so that when we say, “Never again,” we really mean never again.

2.27 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. I join the warm congratulations that were paid to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) on securing the debate and the support that he had from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and, of course, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), to whom we all send good wishes. All three of them have very long-standing commitments to global justice and to the defence and protection of human rights around the world. It is fitting to be having the debate in the week when the 75th anniversary of both the universal declaration of human rights and the UN convention on genocide will be marked. This is an important time for reflection, both on how far we have come and, as others have said, how far we still have to go.

A number of events in and around Parliament have marked these anniversaries. There was an excellent showcase event on Wednesday hosted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and several all-party parliamentary groups. I know that the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief hosted a similar event. Many organisations have also produced very important briefings in advance of the debate, and I hope to draw and reflect on some of them.

This is an issue of deep concern to residents in Glasgow North. It is a constituency of really considerable social and economic diversity, but the constituents are united in their support for justice, peace and respect of human rights around the world. In fact, it boasts not one but two Amnesty International groups. I have regular correspondence and in-person meetings and lobbies with not just Amnesty members, but other constituents from similar organisations who are equally passionate about these issues. I am very proud to be able to speak on their behalf.

One of the most important aspects of the declaration is its universal nature; it applies to everyone, everywhere, equally. Fundamental human rights are just that: they are fundamental, essential and an intrinsic part of human dignity and freedom. They can be denied, or they can be only partially or not even fully realised, but a right in itself cannot be taken away. A prisoner of conscience, arbitrarily detained in a dictatorship, still has a right to freedom of speech under articles 9 and 19. A child experiencing severe malnutrition in a famine-hit country still has a right to food and clean water, just as a homeless people here in central London or in Glasgow North has a right to a roof over their head—both those scenarios come under article 25. A refugee and asylum

seeker today in the United Kingdom still has a fundamental right both to seek asylum and refuge and to work, even if the UK statute book says otherwise.

The universal nature of human rights means that we are all affected. If one person is denied their rights; if one person is not able to live in true and full human dignity; then in some way all our rights and all our collective and individual dignity is diminished. It is to our shame that so many people experience denial of their rights around the world. It is our responsibility, and indeed in this place our special duty and privilege, to work for a world in which everyone’s rights are respected and realised.

I have a few examples. The United Kingdom Government are right to recognise the challenge that China presents to established economic and governance systems around the world. Many of the consumer goods and services that we take for granted here in the UK and other western countries are dependent on labour and produce from China. Far too often, there is a risk that that labour has been forced and used as a means to persecute ethnic and religious minorities. A number of my constituents have had to flee China in fear of their lives because they practise the disciplines of Falun Gong or Falun Dafa. To their immense credit, from their homes in Scotland, they take action to call out the oppression of their fellow practitioners in China today. They would very much like to hear the Minister joining those condemnations, along with condemnation of the treatment of Uyghur Muslims and certain branches of Christianity, not least the locking up of Catholic prelates and clerics, and indeed the general intimidation of anyone who dares to criticise the Chinese Communist party.

It is also my privilege to chair the all-party parliamentary group on Eritrea, a country often described as the North Korea of Africa. I hear that phrase particularly from citizens of Eritrea itself who have fled to the UK in the most difficult and dangerous circumstances. Despite the incredibly high rate of asylum grants to people from Eritrea by the UK Government, the Government now want to be able to deport to Rwanda anyone from Eritrea who arrives by irregular means. But there is no safe and legal route for anyone who has spoken out against the regime in Asmara to leave that country, let alone to arrive in the UK. The UK Government effectively want to ban asylum claims from one of the most oppressive regimes on the planet.

I invite the Minister, perhaps along with the new Illegal Immigration Minister, the hon. and learned Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), to meet some of the young Eritreans who I met here in Parliament on Tuesday and hear their testimonies about the brutality that they have escaped—arbitrary detention, the arrest of family members, forced conscription and torture—and then explain to them why the UK Government’s position is that they are not welcome here and should go back to France, a country where they do not speak the language. The Ministers might also like to listen to their concerns about the Eritrean regime continuing to gather intelligence on their activities here in the UK, and the methods that it uses to levy a 2% tax on the income of expatriates.

Among the organisations at the IPU’s marketplace on Tuesday was ABColombia, which I have worked with both before and since being elected into this House, and with which I had the privilege of visiting Colombia back in 2018—I know that the hon. Member for Rochdale takes a keen interest in the situation in that country as

well. Many of the communities there that face challenges to their human rights experience these less at the hands of the Government and more often as a result of the actions of multinational companies. For example, AngloGold Ashanti wants to displace peasant farmers in the Cajamarca region by opening what its marketing sales makes sound like a small artisanal gold mine. In fact it is called La Colosa, and would involve essentially blowing the top off a mountain, with all the attendant risks to land, water quality and the way of life for people living in hundreds of surrounding square kilometres.

In the north of the country, the multinational Glencore has chosen to sue the Colombian Government for millions of dollars because the constitutional court made a decision to prevent the expansion of its Cerrejón coal mine, which would violate the fundamental rights of the Wayúu indigenous peoples. It is more important than ever that the UK Government seek to find ways to incorporate the Ruggie principles on business and human rights into appropriate legislation and regulations, so that companies based in the UK or that trade on the London stock market are held to the highest possible standards.

One of the biggest themes of the 75th anniversary of the UDHR has been the role of people who defend human rights. A human rights defender could be anyone: a journalist, activist, lawyer, health professional, teacher or other community leader who works to defend human rights and expose injustice.

I remember meeting some of the human rights defenders in Columbia. That phrase—to me, anyway—conjured up an image of grizzled campaigners who had been doing that their whole lives. But what struck me was how remarkably young some of those people were, and how prepared and willing they were to take incredible risks to their wellbeing and future livelihoods to speak out in defence of their communities.

As Amnesty International and others have said, around the world such people are being increasingly stigmatised, intimidated, attacked and subject to unjust prosecutions. One of the particularly salient cases they highlighted was that of Ahmed Mansoor, who has been imprisoned in the United Arab Emirates after speaking out about the detention, torture and unfair trials of other dissenting voices. While much of the world's attention is currently focused on Dubai as it hosts COP28, will the Minister say whether the UK's delegation will raise Ahmed Mansoor's case with the UAE Government or, indeed, whether anybody else visiting that part of the world might also do so?

Several of us here have been able to meet and hear testimony from other human rights defenders who visited Parliament earlier this week, including those supported by Freedom from Torture, Survivors Speak OUT, and the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York, which also has projects across the UK. Many of them echoed those calls for mandatory supply chain due diligence to protect human rights and the environment in the production of the goods that we all take for granted.

I was also asked to raise the decision by the UN Security Council to adopt a UK-drafted resolution lifting the arms embargo on Somalia. What reassurances have the Government received that a fresh flow of legitimate arms to Somalia will not be used by the regime against peaceful protestors and human rights defenders in that country?

As almost everyone has said, we cannot have a debate today about human rights and working to prevent atrocities without discussing the tragedy unfolding in Palestine—a tragedy that has led the United Nations Secretary-General, for the first time during his term of office, to invoke article 99 of the UN Charter, which empowers him to call to the attention of the Security Council a situation that may threaten

“the maintenance of international peace and security.”

The message that I have heard from thousands of constituents in the past two months—from totally unprecedented numbers, as I suspect is true for many of us here today—is that there must be an immediate and lasting ceasefire on both sides. Aid must be delivered, the process of rebuilding must begin, and there must be a just and peaceful political process that delivers a settlement agreeable to all, in line with the global consensus on, and support for, a two-state solution. There must be accountability for the atrocities perpetrated on, and since, 7 October.

The UK Government should be prepared to co-operate with the International Criminal Court's exercise in gathering evidence of potential breaches of international humanitarian law. They must also be explicitly clear that they are not supplying weapons to the region that will end up being used to commit such breaches. More broadly, as the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) said very powerfully, the Government need to step up their efforts to prevent such atrocities from happening in the first place.

Despite the pledges that were made in 1948, genocide has repeatedly been perpetrated. The lessons of the holocaust have clearly not been fully learned, whether it is the killing fields of Cambodia, the slaughter of the Tutsi in Rwanda, the massacres in Srebrenica or the atrocities committed against the Yazidi people by Islamic State/Daesh in 2014. Monitoring organisations identify as many as 20 emergencies worldwide where persecution and killings may be meeting the definitions of genocide.

The UK Government have to adopt a whole-of-Government approach to adopting an atrocity prevention strategy, and they should look again at proposals for a genocide prevention response Bill, such as that recently introduced in the House of Lords. The hon. Member for Strangford was right to draw attention to how persecution of religious communities is a particular part of the growing trend of mass intimidation, persecution and, indeed, killing, around the world, and the extremism that appears to be driving that.

It is shameful that we should end up having this debate on the day after the United Kingdom Government announced proposals in their own legislation to override so much of the global human rights framework. By their own definition—found in two of their own Bills this year—their approach to people who come to the United Kingdom seeking refuge and asylum might not be, and in fact probably is not, compliant with their duties under the European convention on human rights. My constituents in Glasgow North do not support this Tory Government's approach to people who arrive here from many of the countries discussed today. They flee war, oppression and persecution, and then find themselves being oppressed and their rights to claim asylum being denied in the very country where they are seeking sanctuary. We will oppose the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill next week, just as we opposed the

[Patrick Grady]

Illegal Migration Act 2023. The day will come soon when Scotland can have its own independent migration policy, and make it clear that refugees are welcome here.

Perhaps looking to the future is a good note to begin to end on. Yesterday, many of us will have met inspiring young activists who came to Parliament from across the country to talk about the climate emergency and the need for climate justice. The rights of the planet itself and the rights of future generations should not be forgotten as we mark the anniversaries of the human rights declaration and the genocide convention. I thank Darcey and Isobel from The Holy Cross School in New Malden, who took time yesterday to explain many of the works of art and design on display in the Attlee Suite. They captured their generation's response to the climate challenge and the need for action now, by this generation of politicians and global leaders, to ensure a just and equitable distribution of the planet's resources for everyone who lives here, now and in the future.

This has been a valuable opportunity to reflect on 75 years of the global human rights framework, and the many challenges and barriers to fully realising the vision first set out in 1948. That vision is shared by many of our constituents and championed by many of the Members present, especially those who secured the debate. The Government, and indeed the official Opposition, must understand that this is where true consensus in modern politics can and must be found. Pandering to ever more extreme views that seek to minimise the importance of fundamental human rights, or that seek to other or even dehumanise sections or groups within society, is not a route to effective and stable governance, but to ever-more discord and trouble. We have a responsibility both to everyone on the planet today and to future generations to live up to the declaration of our post-war predecessors, and to keep on striving for a day when human rights truly are universal.

2.41 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh, for this debate to mark the 75th anniversary of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights and the UN convention on genocide. I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this important debate and for the way in which he opened it. I put on record my best wishes to the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) and wish him a speedy recovery.

To pick up on what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, I too am disappointed that a debate of this significance, marking such an important milestone, has not attracted more Members. Irrespective of that, it has been a thoughtful and considered debate. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford, the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), and my esteemed colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for the way in which they have participated.

What has come out of this debate is the harsh and disturbing truth that the UDHR and the genocide convention have rarely been more needed than they are right now. While we can take for granted the fundamental rights of freedom of belief, freedom of speech, human dignity and justice for all, for far too many people that

is simply not the case. Attacks based on race, skin colour, religion, belief, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and so much else continue to rise in just about every part of the world. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford for his fabulous work as chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. He is right when he says that not all human rights breaches are violations of FORB, but all violations of FORB are a breach of fundamental, individual human rights, and FORB cannot be hived off or treated any differently.

Members will be aware that throughout this week, in just about every corner of the estate, events have been taking place to mark the UDHR and the genocide convention, with politicians, academics and religious leaders sharing their thoughts on how far we have come and how far we still have to go. Like many Members present, my diary was full of invitations to speak and to attend events, and I managed to get round as many as I could.

However, I will single out one event, which is the event on Tuesday that has been referred to already by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North. It was the event organised by the all-party parliamentary group on human rights and the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union. Various human rights groups came along, including ABColombia, Amnesty International, the Prisoners of Conscience trust, the Campaign for Human Rights in the Philippines, Freedom from Torture, Peace Brigades International UK, Survivors Speak Out, the University of York's Centre for Applied Human Rights and Survival International.

Alongside each of those groups was one or more incredibly brave human rights defender—people working at the grassroots in their communities and facing extreme personal danger, but nevertheless doing the work. Listening to their stories confirmed the vital importance of the UDHR, how fragile it is and how we must all work to defend it. In the spirit of what my hon. Friend said, those young people were not just there defending their own human rights or those of their community; they are on the frontline of defending the human rights of every single one of us.

As we have heard, it was on 9 December 1948, in the wake of one of the most heinous episodes in recorded history, that the countries that were then members of the United Nations formally adopted the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide. The following day, 10 December 1948, they signed the universal declaration of human rights.

As Professor Brett Scharffs, Director of the International Centre for Law and Religious Studies at Brigham Young University, said at a meeting here in Parliament yesterday, the people behind those conventions,

“were not starry-eyed idealists, nor were they naive. They were battle-weary statesmen and women who had come through two devastating World Wars and were sincerely searching for a better way. Their hope, their optimism and their idealism was hard-earned.”

In a world still reeling from the unspeakable horror of the holocaust, world leaders came together with one voice, saying, “Never again.” Never again, they declared, would the world be plunged into a global conflict of the kind that had dominated most of the first half of the 20th century, and never again would the world be reduced to being a passive bystander when a people or group were facing systematic persecution, ethnic cleansing or genocide based on their nationality, race, religion or ethnicity.

Those world leaders, who had seen for themselves the horrors of the Nazis and who had lived through them, fervently hoped that this new treaty was going to be one of the most transformative and important pieces of legislation in our history. When they said, “Never again”, they meant it. Those dates, 9 and 10 December 1948, changed everything because, as the hon. Member for Putney said, from then on states were not only committed to having a legal obligation to criminalise genocide and punish the perpetrators; they were legally obliged to act if they became aware of a serious risk of genocide.

In reality, unfortunately, it would be more accurate to say that 9 and 10 December 1948 should have changed everything, because bitter experience tells us that gross violations of human rights and genocides have not stopped in the intervening 75 years. Indeed, the crime of genocide has continued almost unchecked, in the killing fields of Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Darfur, in the mountains of Sinjar, in Syria, in Myanmar, and in many other places.

Despite 150 countries being signatories to the genocide convention, making them legally obliged to act against genocide, we still witness atrocities in Ukraine, Tigray, Darfur, Xinjiang, Afghanistan and Gaza, while other areas display the early warning signs of being at risk. As we mark the 75th anniversary of the UDHR, the sad reality is that the noble ambition of its founders has been lost in a fog of political expediency and the quite uncanny ability of world leaders to ignore the blatant reality of what is staring them in the face.

In 2023, world leaders still roundly condemn atrocity crime, but because of the legal obligation that the genocide convention puts on them, they are still reluctant to call it what it is: a genocide. To avoid having to adhere to their legal responsibilities, they find it easier to ignore the reality of what is happening, thereby fostering a widespread expectation of impunity among the perpetrators.

Sadly, in my experience, when a President, Prime Minister or Secretary of State solemnly declares, “Never again”, what they are in fact saying is, “I genuinely hope this never happens again, but should it happen again on my watch, don’t expect me to do very much about it.”

As was highlighted by the hon. Members for Strangford and for Putney and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North, a huge part of the problem is that this Government still have no atrocity prevention strategy. As late as November 2021, when asked why they do not have one, they replied that they did not believe it was necessary. Minister, is that still the Government’s position? After all that we have seen in Ukraine, Gaza, Tigray, Darfur and Xinjiang, is that really still the UK Government’s position? If it is, will the Minister explain how he thinks that is working?

I expect there to be much backslapping and lots of self-congratulatory speeches in the coming days as the world marks those truly momentous days in December 1948, but it is worth taking a few moments to reflect on the reality of just how far we have actually come in the last 75 years and perhaps consider how those hard-bitten, battle-weary architects of the UDHR and the genocide convention would view what we have done to achieve their ideal of ridding the world of genocide and atrocity crime.

2.51 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am very grateful to be called, Ms McDonagh. I believe this is the first time that I have served under your chairship; I hope it

will not be the last. I am also very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale and the hon. Member for Strangford spoke with great knowledge and passion, and I am grateful to them. I also want to put on record my best wishes to the hon. Member for Henley for a speedy and full recovery. Before I start, I would also like to thank in particular Kate Ferguson of Protection Approaches, who works with Members across the House. She is a real source of huge support on how we can use our tools more strategically to prevent atrocities.

The 75th anniversaries of the universal declaration on human rights and the genocide convention are this weekend, and I want to start by noting what an achievement they were. The world came together after the devastation of the second world war and the utter unprecedented horror of the holocaust, and committed to action. I know we all believe that working together internationally against genocide and human rights abuses is no less essential today.

As we have heard, right now in Sudan there are massive numbers of people under threat. The past weeks and months have brought more and more evidence of mass killings, rapes and the systematic forced displacement of civilians. The evidence is particularly strong that the Masalit communities are repeatedly—repeatedly—targeted for atrocities. Right now, El Fasher in North Darfur is in desperate peril. Civilians in Khartoum continue to be killed and denied humanitarian access, and the violence is spreading.

I truly welcome the United States’ determination of war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, and in particular the recognition that arms and funding to the military faction fuels the horror, not matter what the source. I believe the US determination builds on work in this House and in Government, where we have worked together to shine just a fraction of the light that Sudan’s crisis requires. As we warned before the summer, permanent partition or even state collapse in Sudan is an increasingly serious risk. The scale of atrocities that could result, in addition to the many already committed, is simply enormous.

Despite the severity of the humanitarian crisis, the UK, as the UN Security Council penholder on Sudan, is now presiding over the closure of the UN’s Sudan mission. So far, the international community has not had enough co-ordination and commitment for the mediation in Saudi Arabia or the African Union’s leadership to have an impact. The situation is utterly bleak. It is joined, as we know, by the sheer horror in Gaza that we see day after day on our screens, where children are being killed in their thousands as their homes are bombed; where civilians are being kettled into so-called safe zones that are anything but; and where the siege continues and humanitarian access is denied despite the tireless efforts of colleagues.

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

However, we cannot just sit here and wring our hands. I believe that we cannot be content with symbolic acts of condemnation, and we cannot let petty political divisions take hold—not when it comes to Sudan, Myanmar or Gaza. We must not allow ourselves to be distracted from what we can actually do, because, as the raw

[Ms Lyn Brown]

ongoing experiences of Sudan teach us, the way in which we work against atrocities and support universal human rights needs to adapt. Let us face it: we live in a more polarised world than in recent decades, and it is far more complex and fragmented than in the 1950s. The relationships that we need to navigate are much larger in number and massively diverse in nature. Misinformation and hate speech spread at a speed and scale that we have never seen before. That means that we must approach these questions from a place of humility and respect, recognising that we are not always the best people to lead; that we do not always have the answer; and that trust is hard-won and easily lost. We must recognise that our international reputation has been damaged over recent years and look to renew it.

Sadly, many of the tools of the multilateral system, such as Security Council resolutions and UN sanctions, simply are not as accessible as they once were. To be frank, as we know, that is sometimes because Russia sees chaos, destruction and division as being in its interest. However, in other cases it is much more complicated than that.

Jim Shannon: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady. I recall that this morning I got a message—actually, a video—on my phone. The message was clear: 120,000 Christians in Artsakh—I hope that is pronounced correctly—in Armenia are under threat. They have no gas, water or electricity; they have no hope, and they are being butchered by an Islamic regime sponsored by Russia. I will make a plea for them, if the Minister is listening. That is another example of genocide against my brothers and sisters.

Ms Brown: Certainly. I hear the hon. Gentleman's plea, and I am sure that the Minister will be able to respond to that with knowledge and compassion. I argue that the causes I spoke about earlier, and which we have all spoken about today, make the challenges of this agenda so much more challenging, not less—and more necessary.

It is now more important to support accountability through the International Criminal Court, including in conflicts we see on our screens day in, day out in Ukraine, Palestine and Israel. It is more important to work with civil society and protect human rights defenders and journalists. Most importantly, in a world that seems ever more dangerous, the prevention duty in the genocide convention is more relevant, not less. If we are smart and strategic, we can do a lot to work against the perpetrators, enablers and drivers of atrocities. The UK has powerful strengths that we can deploy, including our still-expansive diplomatic network and national expertise in legal and financial services.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Rochdale and for Putney (Fleur Anderson) have said, we need to raise the alarm early, based on more extensive mapping and monitoring of atrocity risks and stronger links to civil society organisations. We need to work with our partners to bring together information about the networks that fuel atrocities, rapidly build awareness of patterns of rising violence and share evidence of responsibility. We then need to be proactive by using that greater understanding of those driving the violence to press armed groups towards de-escalation and mediation and to cut off external backers' money to perpetrators.

We need to empower our excellent in-country diplomats to support the community-level leaders and human rights defenders who can make the difference when it matters most to prevent an escalating crisis. That is so rarely about big, flashy money; it is about rapid, quiet support for those who can calm tensions, provide credible alternative narratives in place of incitement and, if the worst comes to the worst, document the violence so that perpetrators can be held to account. It surely goes without saying that preventing a crisis avoids the vastly bigger costs of humanitarian aid, forced migration, emergency evacuations of UK nationals and the loss of development opportunities, which are shattered for years to come. And it saves lives.

What I am saying is that we need a prevention-first approach. The White Paper makes genuine, welcome progress on that, but we now need consistent leadership to turn words into reality over the coming years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale said, there are serious concerns about Rwanda—internally in terms of human rights and externally via the evidence of atrocities by the March 23 Movement in the DRC. That has been raised in FCDO, in addition to being raised multiple times by colleagues on both sides of the House. I gently say that it may damage our relationships with many partners if there is a suspicion that a narrow migration partnership, which the Opposition do not support, might be getting in the way of consistent UK support for human rights and atrocity prevention.

But it is not all bleakness and horror. If we work together and are strategic, we can help to slow the increasing violence across the world. To give just one example, there is hope that the draft convention on prevention and punishment of crimes against humanity will continue to make progress with UK support. Perhaps—just perhaps—the convention might add strength where some argue that existing international laws fall short. Perhaps there will be more legal and diplomatic clarity in future about the intentional denial of access to food, water or medicine in internal conflict. Sadly, that has been evidenced in recent years in Ethiopia and now in Sudan.

We need to consistently support progress where we can. A safer world, where rights are protected for all, is a world with far fewer people in desperate need of humanitarian aid. It is a world where the politics of division and hatred is harder for malign actors to exploit, and it is a world with more opportunities and security for the UK—a world where we do not scramble from crisis to crisis, but where our long-term international partnerships can flourish for mutual benefit. Surely we want to live in a world where the high ideals of 75 years ago are truly honoured and implemented, and surely that is worth fighting for, with strategic thinking and with passion.

3.4 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I think this is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley; it is a great pleasure, and I very much hope it will not be the last. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Members for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate, and very grateful indeed to the hon. Member for Rochdale for his kind words about my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). It has been an extraordinarily good debate, and one that reflects extremely well on the

House. I say that because I think the issues that have been raised have been governed by a steady theme, and that there has been a degree of unity on both sides of Westminster Hall. I hope that my speech will reflect that. May I say at the outset that I hope I will pick up virtually all the points made, but if I miss out any point, my diligent officials will make sure that we write to hon. Members to address it.

It is my great pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I am grateful for the contributions of all hon. Members and I will, as I said, try to respond to all the points raised. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rochdale both for his words and for his tone. I can confirm that he is remembered with great affection in the Foreign Office from his time serving there. I also thank him for his comments on the White Paper and his emphasis on the importance of working upstream, which the White Paper sets out very clearly. I thank the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) for her words about the White Paper. Having been at the COP last weekend, I confirm that the document is resonating with our friends and colleagues around the world, not least because 50 countries had input into it. It has been welcomed by all parties in the House of Commons, and I think it charts the way ahead in a number of very important ways.

To pick up a point that the hon. Member for Rochdale made, I confirm that we ratified the Istanbul convention back in 2022. Although some reservations remain, we are committed to implementing our obligations under the convention. May I thank him for his personal remarks when he said that he found me to be among the more endearing members of the end of the Conservative party? I am extremely relieved that he thinks we have got an endearing end, and thank him very much for his remarks.

I thank the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson) and for West Ham for their words about Kate Ferguson and protection approaches, and for explaining eloquently why they matter so much. I have worked with Kate Ferguson both in opposition and in government, which shows you how long this relationship is, Mr Paisley. I too pay tribute to her for the drive and ambition with which she prosecutes these issues.

Seventy-five years ago, a visionary group of leaders came together to make two bold statements of intent. In a world ravaged by war and divided by ideology, they recognised that every human on earth has certain inalienable rights—rights that must never again be threatened or trampled on—and so the universal declaration of human rights came into being. The day before endorsing the declaration, the United Nations General Assembly added the convention on genocide. It was a powerful recognition that in the aftermath of the holocaust, international co-operation is required to liberate humankind from the “odious scourge” of genocide that has—in all periods—inflicted great losses on humanity.

When one considers the world in which they were forged, the declaration and convention are remarkable achievements. They committed future generations to an immense responsibility. I think one of the best books I have ever read was that written by Philippe Sands, “East West Street”, which sets out very clearly the birth pangs of that strategy. When one considers the terrible challenges that the world faces today—humanitarian crises, conflicts and more—we feel the weight of that responsibility resting on all of our shoulders.

Britain is determined to carry onward the torch handed to us by those pioneers and do everything we can to protect life and dignity, and shape a world where human rights are safeguarded, democracy is at the fore and the rule of law is respected.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I apologise for not being able to be here for the whole of this important debate. I am really interested in the points the Minister is making about ensuring human rights are embedded across the world. Does he recognise the role that the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and other organisations play in promoting human rights to parliamentarians around the world? Will he join me in praising them for the way they help parliamentarians who believe in human rights to bring them to their Parliaments?

Mr Mitchell: I agree fulsomely with my right hon. Friend. She has undoubtedly read the international development White Paper, in which all these strands of thinking are drawn out. The Government made a very strong commitment in it to enable those brilliant organisations to continue their excellent work.

All hon. Members who spoke underlined the importance of shaping a world where human rights are safeguarded, democracy is at the fore and the rule of law is respected. I hope our forefathers would be pleased if they heard what the House has been saying today. We must use our voice on the international stage to highlight human rights violations, galvanise action and hold those responsible for abuses to account. All the while, we must work with partners across the globe to be a force for good, stand up for the vulnerable and champion equal rights for all. At a time when internationalism is so badly needed, we see an international system that is weak and divided, but let us never forget that in parts of the world where events and actions are very dark indeed, the UK has often been a beacon of light.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to reflect on some of the key aspects of that work, which have been identified in the debate. First, on accountability, the recent events in Israel/Gaza are a tragedy, as many have set out. Together with the United States, last month we targeted the Hamas leadership with a new tranche of sanctions, restricting the group’s ability to operate. We have been clear that we support Israel’s right to defend itself proportionately in response to the terrorist acts by Hamas. We are appalled by the reports of rape and sexual violence committed during those brutal attacks on 7 October. The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war at any time, in any place, is abhorrent and a grotesque violation of international humanitarian law, and must be condemned without reservation. It is important that all action is in accordance with international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians. Britain recently announced an additional £30 million of British aid for vital supplies into Gaza.

In Ukraine, nearly two years on from its illegal invasion, Russia continues to demonstrate a total disregard for human rights and human life. We led efforts to refer the situation in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court, and created the Atrocity Crimes

Advisory Group alongside our allies from the European Union and the United States. Inside Russia, repression has increased, with a systematic crackdown on civil

[Mr Mitchell]

society. Alongside partners, we have reiterated calls for the immediate release of those detained in Russia on political grounds.

Meanwhile, in October we delivered a statement on behalf of 50 countries at the UN, drawing attention to the serious violations being suffered by members of the Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, China. In the Human Rights Council and UN Security Council, we led on resolutions establishing or renewing UN accountability mechanisms for Syria, South Sudan, Sudan and Iraq.

Reports of an increase in ethnicity-based violence in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan are profoundly troubling. The international community must act to prevent history repeating itself.

On the subject of Sudan, which was raised by the hon. Members for West Ham and for Strangford, I wish to say a little more about what we are doing. Since the outbreak of conflict in April, over 6.3 million people have been displaced. In a BBC interview on 1 October I condemned the violence in western Sudan and made it clear that it

“bears all the hallmarks of ethnic cleansing.”

On 17 November Britain, alongside Troika partners—the United States and Norway—published a joint statement condemning the reported mass killings in west, central and south Darfur. The British Government are funding the Centre for Information Resilience, a research body that is gathering open-source evidence about the ongoing fighting in Sudan. This financial year we have provided £600,000 to CIR’s Sudan witness project.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Mitchell: I will, if the hon. Gentleman just gives me a moment. Britain also continues to fund and provide support to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Sudan, a UN body that provides a crucial role in monitoring and reporting on human rights violations.

In October Britain led efforts at the Human Rights Council to establish an international and independent fact-finding mission to gather and preserve evidence of credible human rights violations and abuses, including atrocities committed in Darfur.

Since the outbreak of conflict on 15 April we have also taken steps specifically on atrocity prevention. We have enhanced our atrocity risk monitoring, including monitoring of conflict-related sexual violence, and put dedicated capacity on human rights and atrocity prevention into the Foreign Office’s new Sudan unit. I am happy to receive the information that the hon. Member for Strangford kindly said he would send me. I have gone into Sudan in some detail because there is great interest in what is happening in Sudan, particularly in Darfur, and I wanted to share it with the House.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response to our concerns over Sudan. I mentioned in my contribution that I understand the United Kingdom holds the key for Sudan when it comes to any vote at the United Nations. If that is correct, is it the intention of our Government and our Minister, or whoever will be responsible, to use that key that they hold to make sure

that the very clear issue of genocide that is taking place in Sudan can be brought to the attention of the United Nations at the highest place, and then we can act on it as well?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Member for Strangford is quite right to identify the importance of Britain’s role as the penholder on Sudan. He will have seen the extensive work that we are carrying out in that role not only in the United Nations, but as one of the Troika and one of the countries that works closely with the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and many other bodies to try to bring peace and stability back to that country that is suffering so much. On the words that I used about what is going on in Sudan, if the hon. Member looks at *Hansard* tomorrow, he will see that I have been very clear in what I have said and what I have condemned.

On atrocity prevention, we joined Gambia in its petition to the International Court of Justice for measures against the Myanmar junta in its actions against the Rohingya people, which many have spoken of eloquently in the House.

On the issue of realising rights, human rights are essential to achieving sustainable development—a point that was made by the hon. Lady who leads for the Opposition, the hon. Member for West Ham. Our new international development White Paper, which has already been mentioned, sets out commitments towards promoting peace, justice and strong institutions. UK funding is supporting action to protect human rights across the globe, leveraging diplomatic engagement—I thank her for her words about the diplomatic service—and targeted programming alongside our international partners. The high commission in Kuala Lumpur is funding a project to support gender equality, networking opportunities and resources for women.

In Mongolia, Britain’s contribution to the UN trust fund to end violence against women has helped support women’s rights organisations to provide disability-inclusive services to survivors of intimate partner violence. In Ukraine, Britain’s funding so far has enabled 153 judges and 36 prosecutors to receive training in forming war crimes judgments to ensure that robust, evidenced war crimes cases can be brought to trial. In a connected world, the internet and independent media have a powerful role in supporting democracy and human rights. As such, Britain will continue to be at the forefront of efforts to support media freedom, to counter politically motivated internet shutdowns and to tackle disinformation.

Turning to promoting equality, our international women and girls strategy underscores the three E’s: educating girls, empowering women and girls by championing their health and rights—in particular, their ability to decide for themselves whether and when they have children—and ending gender-based violence. Work to make that a reality is needed at all levels. At the UN Human Rights Council, we partnered with the United Arab Emirates to secure a resolution on girls’ education and climate change. In the past year, Britain has sanctioned 15 individuals and entities that have committed human rights violations against women and girls, including crimes of sexual violence in conflict. On the ground, Britain’s programming supports women’s rights organisations to provide services to survivors of intimate partner violence. We also support up to 1.6 million marginalised girls across 17 countries to gain an education.

We must remain ever vigilant against attempts to roll back fundamental rights and equality for all. Too often we see attempts to reverse or undermine the rights of women, girls and LGBT+ people at the local and national level, as well as online. That has a huge impact on the lives and safety of individuals and on national prosperity, democracy and security. We will continue to use every tool at our disposal, with the full weight of UK expertise and clout, to shift the dial and stay true to the universal declaration's promise of equal rights for all.

I raise the issue of the relevance of new technology. Of course, the world does not stand still, which is why I want to think about the future. Developments such as artificial intelligence present not only huge opportunities but risks for human rights. The Bletchley declaration of the AI safety summit recognised that the protection of those rights needs to be addressed for AI, alongside principles such as transparency, fairness, safety and privacy. The UK is committed to the design, development, deployment and use of such technologies in a way that is consistent with the rule of law.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) raised Somalia and the new resolution before the United Nations. He will be aware that the President of Somalia was a guest of the Government here in London just a week or so ago, and was the principal speaker, along with our Prime Minister, at the global food security summit. Britain is a very close partner of Somalia, involved in all aspects of that country's work and life. I first visited Mogadishu 11 years ago. I went back there just under a year ago and saw the extraordinary changes being wrought in a country that has suffered so deeply from violence and underdevelopment. The auspices for beating back the terrorists are good—they are better than they have been—and we will continue to firmly support Somalia in every way we can. As the penholder on Somalia, we work closely with all parties to drive forward that ambition, and the declaration to which the hon. Gentleman referred makes that clear.

To conclude, 75 years after the declaration and convention, when the world stood firm to avow “never again”, freedoms continue alas to be under serious threat. Millions of people around the world continue to suffer persecution. There is a blessing recited on Holocaust Memorial Day that includes the words,

“our hearts grow cold as we think of the splendour that might have been.”

Every life lost is a loss for the world. Our past commitments must be used to build the future that every human being deserves, and I hope the words used across this debate will give encouragement to people in many places who are caught up in desperate jeopardy.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you Minister. I know that Members will appreciate that very comprehensive overview.

3.25 pm

Tony Lloyd: I begin by thanking the hon. Members for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for their comments about the reception two days ago, which was actually hosted by IPU, the chair of which is with us today—the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley)—and myself as chair of the APPG on human rights.

I want to make a quick reflection. I am perhaps a little older than some people in this debate, and I grew up in a world where Africa and other parts of the world were subject to colonialism; when we saw South Africa descend into apartheid; when we saw brutal proxy wars in Mozambique and Angola; and when we saw the violent decolonisation process in Kenya, at least in part because of the acts of our own society, and even more so in French Algeria. I have lived through the Vietnam war, the bombing of Cambodia and the atrocities that later took place there.

I could go on and on: military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile and many other parts of the world; here in Europe, Greece was under the heel of the colonels; Spain and Portugal were fascist dictatorships; and central Europe—or the east of Europe, as we used to call it—was under the yoke of domination by the then Soviet Union, or even military rule in the case of Poland.

I do not say that to say that it has always been bad. I say it because change can happen, and change happened in all those places because of political will. It is the political will inspired by the universal declaration of human rights and by the genocide convention that can make a material difference in this world. We have heard some very good speeches today, and I congratulate everyone who has taken part. It is important that in this House of Commons, this Parliament of ours, we uphold the values of human rights. I have to say that we heard some very good things from the Minister that we, as a nation, can be proud of in terms of our own contribution. In the end, it is that exchange of not simply resources, although that does matter, but values that can make a huge difference in this world. That can enshrine the values of these two things that we celebrate today and make the change around the world that is there.

Obviously, in the end, there are very great specifics in this, but there does need to be political will. That political will needs to be internationalised; it is not enough for us to be a model country. We have to be part of an international consensus for change. We need to build the institutions: the human rights defenders, the environmental protectors, and the NGOs around the world. I think it was my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) who mentioned the role of the International Criminal Court. It is also, of course, about looking to strengthen those institutions that can make a material difference—not simply the ICC, but others too. That is a role we have to play our part in, but internationalise as well.

I think the message that has come across today is that we must fight for the change that we want to see take place. We have heard some good things, and we have actually heard a commitment to real action. We need to see more action from our Government—in fact, all our Governments—on a global basis. This debate has been significant because it does say, once again, that those who had the political will 75 years ago lit a light, and we must bear that light into the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Convention on Genocide.

3.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 7 December 2023

HOME DEPARTMENT

BBC Funding

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lucy Frazer): The Government are today announcing the level of the licence fee for 2024-25 and the launch of a review of the BBC's funding model.

As agreed with the BBC in the 2022 licence fee settlement, following a two-year freeze the licence fee is due to rise in line with inflation from April 2024. The Government will use the annual rate of the consumer prices index in September 2023 to calculate this uplift. This is the same way the Government calculate inflation-linked increases to state pensions and benefits.

This decision means that next year's licence fee increase will be kept as low as possible. In April, the licence fee will rise by 6.7%, to £169.50 annually. This will limit the increase to £10.50 over the year, or 88p per month, rather than a rise of £14.50, which would have happened under the previous CPI measure of an average of the 12 months to September.

The Government engaged with both the BBC and S4C to understand the impacts on the finances of both broadcasters.

The Government recognise that the licence fee model faces challenges in an increasingly competitive media landscape. The Government are therefore launching a review of the BBC's funding model. The review will look at how we can ensure that the funding model is fair to licence fee payers, sustainable for the long term, and supports the BBC's vital role in growing our creative industries.

The review will be led by DCMS and supported by an expert panel.

The findings of the review will support the Government to make an informed choice on whether to consult the public on moving to alternative funding models. This would take place as part of the charter review process, where any final decision on reforming the BBC's funding model would be taken.

The terms of reference for the review will be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS107]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

SLAPPs Taskforce Work Plan

The Minister for Media, Tourism and Creative Industries (Sir John Whittingdale): We are pleased to inform the House that the taskforce dedicated to tackling strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), which target journalists, is today publishing a plan of its future activity.

SLAPPs are considered an abuse of the legal process, where the primary objective is to harass, intimidate and financially and psychologically exhaust one's opponent via improper and costly legal intervention. Launched by HM Government, the taskforce is developing a non-legislative response to SLAPPs targeting journalists, which deter important public-interest reporting.

The taskforce has agreed to undertake an ambitious plan of activity that will address SLAPPs across four separate workstreams: understanding and monitoring the prevalence and nature of SLAPPs; guidance for journalists; legal services ethics; and awareness-raising. Outputs will be delivered by the Government, civil society groups, representative bodies for journalists and legal services stakeholders. These include factual guidance to provide clarity over journalists' legal rights when faced with SLAPPs tactics, a forum for cross-regulator agreement on conduct for legal professionals dealing with SLAPPs, and an industry-facing conference to promote the taskforce's work. An online data-gathering tool that will be launched by the National Union of Journalists to boost the evidence base about safety issues affecting journalists will also be designed to enable journalists to self-report SLAPPs confidentially.

The taskforce sits within the framework of the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists, which was set up to ensure that journalists operating in the UK can do so free from violence or threats, and forms part of the refreshed national action plan for the safety of journalists published in October this year. It will report to the committee regularly on its progress to ensure activity is aligned to the wider safety of journalists.

The work of the SLAPPs taskforce will be key in driving forward the Government commitment to ensuring an environment in which media freedom can flourish and journalists are safe to investigate and publish stories in the public interest, holding power to account and carrying out their vital role in upholding democracy.

[HCWS103]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

FCDO Funded Scholarship Schemes: Response to Independent Review

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I wish to inform the House that the Government have today published the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office response to the independent public body review of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (CSC) and the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission (MACC), and the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office's internal Chevening scholarship programme.

The Government launched a review of FCDO's arm's length bodies' scholarships schemes and Chevening scholarships in 2022. The review was independent and formed part of the public bodies review programme which delivers against the commitments made in the declaration on Government reform to increase the effectiveness of organisations to ensure they are set up in the best possible way to deliver.

The review sets out clear and comprehensive recommendations which will enable us to undertake a programme of reform to better support the scholarships schemes. This will ensure the three schemes continue to perform at a high level, with closer alignment to each other to ensure a mutually supportive portfolio of scholarship schemes that are greater than the sum of their parts, and which support the FCDO's international diplomacy and development objectives.

We have published a response to the review, which sets out our response to each of the recommendations. The Government accept all the review's recommendations, noting that some require additional budget, and the feasibility of new funding will be explored in the next spending review. The Government also accept that further detailed collaborative work with the ALBs and Chevening will be required before the implementation of all recommendations is completed.

The FCDO-funded scholarship schemes are integral to supporting the Department's international diplomacy and development objectives, and we are grateful to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission and the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission for engaging positively with this review. We would also like to extend our thanks to the lead reviewer and the review team for dedicating much time and consideration to this review, and for producing clear and useful recommendations which will enable us to build on the important work of the FCDO-funded scholarship schemes.

The publication will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS104]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Coronial Investigations of Term Stillbirths: Summary of Responses to the Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I wish to update the House on the responses received to a joint consultation by the Department of Health and Social Care and Ministry of Justice on coronial investigations of stillbirths in England and Wales.

Over the years, there have been calls from bereaved families, charities and others for a more transparent and independent process for determining the causes of, and learning from, stillbirths. Some of those calling for change identified coronial investigations as the way to deliver an improved process.

Under current legislation, coroners cannot investigate a death when it is known that the baby was not born alive. If there is doubt whether a baby was born alive, a coroner can investigate (which could include holding an inquest) but must halt that investigation if they determine that the baby was stillborn.

The consultation sought views on proposals on whether, and if so how, coronial investigations of stillbirth cases could take place in England and Wales.

The objectives of the proposals, which were co-developed with stakeholders, were to:

- bring greater independence to the way stillbirths are investigated;
- ensure transparency and enhance the involvement of bereaved parents in stillbirth investigation processes, including in the development of recommendations aimed at improving maternity care; and

effectively disseminate learning from investigations across the health system to help prevent future avoidable stillbirths.

Some 334 people responded to the consultation and 63 people attended our stakeholder workshops. I and my ministerial colleague at the Ministry of Justice are extremely grateful to those who responded and shared their views, particularly families who have experienced stillbirth and shared their personal and often tragic experiences. This was so important to us in considering our response.

Work to respond to the consultation was paused during the pandemic. Today I am sharing a factual summary of the consultation findings. The findings of the consultation were complex: there were mixed views about proposals that coroners should have a role in stillbirth investigations and where they were supportive, about the way in which coronial investigations would be carried out.

In addition, the landscape of maternity investigations has changed significantly since the consultation. The maternity and new-born safety investigations programme is now in place, which aims to provide independent, standardised and family focused investigations for families; to provide learning to the health system via reports at local, regional and national level; analyse data to identify key trends and provide system wide learning; be a system expert in standards for maternity investigations; and collaborate with system partners to escalate safety concerns. Additionally, the perinatal mortality review tool supports standardised perinatal mortality reviews across NHS maternity and neonatal units in the UK. Going forward, my officials are working to improve the information available to families regarding these investigative processes that may be taken forward following a stillbirth. I wish to reassure the House that a further statement will be issued in due course, which sets out whether, and if so, how the Government intend to take action.

The factual summary of consultation responses is available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/coronial-investigations-of-stillbirths>. The document has also been placed in the Library of both Houses.

[HCWS105]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Rules

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): I am today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

Changes to visitor rules

As set out in the spring Budget 2023, we are amending the list of permitted business activities that can be undertaken by individuals on a UK Visit visa, including by: removing the restriction on visitors working directly with clients in an intra-corporate context, subject to the activity being incidental to their employment abroad and to the delivery of a wider project by the UK branch of their overseas employer; naming remote work as a permitted activity, providing this is not the primary purpose of the visit; expanding the list of unpaid work activities that legal professionals can undertake in the UK, allowing scientists to conduct research in the UK

as part of their visit; and allowing pilots and cabin crew members to travel to the UK as part of a Civil Aviation Authority approved wet leasing agreement.

We are also reforming permitted paid engagements (PPE), by including speaking at conferences in the list of permitted engagements. By incorporating the provisions of the route into the standard visitor route, to enable easier switching between PPE activities and the other permitted business activities, and to enable easier travel across the UK border for nationalities eligible to use e-passport gates.

Introduction of new appendix statelessness

We are making changes to the partner and child rules on the statelessness route.

A partner or child will no longer be eligible to apply for permission as a dependent under the stateless route but will instead need to meet the requirements to come to, or stay in, the UK as a partner or child of a stateless person under the family rules in appendix FM. A person who already has permission as a partner or child of a stateless person under the current stateless immigration rules in part 14 will be able to continue to extend their permission or stay in the UK under those provisions.

Changes to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS)

The EUSS enables EU, other European Economic Area (EEA) and Swiss citizens living in the UK by the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020, and their family members, to obtain the immigration status they need to continue living in the UK. We are making two particular changes where the EUSS is concerned.

First, to reinforce the Government approach to tackling illegal migration, we will prevent a valid application to the EUSS as a joining family member being made by an irregular arrival to the UK, which will include small boat arrivals, as well as by an illegal entrant. Second, consistent with the temporary protection of rights conferred on them by the citizens' rights agreements for three months from their arrival in the UK, we will require a person in the UK as a visitor to make any application to the EUSS as a joining family member within three months of their arrival subject to reasonable grounds for any delay in applying.

Changes to travel document requirements for school groups visiting the UK from France

We are making changes to allow children aged 18 and under, studying at a school in France, to visit the UK on an organised educational trip without the usual passport or visit visa requirements. EU, other EEA and Swiss national children will be able to travel on their national identity card. Visa national children will still be required to travel on their passport but will not have to obtain a visit visa.

Introduction of new appendix victim of domestic abuse

We are introducing an out of country settlement route for victims of transnational marriage abandonment.

Changes to the youth mobility scheme

The youth mobility scheme (YMS) implements the international commitments that have been made to provide cultural exchange programmes for young people.

We are adding Uruguay to the list of countries and territories participating in the YMS and making changes to reflect that the UK's existing reciprocal, bilateral arrangements with Japan and the Republic of Korea have been enhanced.

The changes to the immigration rules are being laid on 7 December 2023 and will come into effect on various dates between 7 December 2023 and 31 January 2024.

[HCWS106]

TRANSPORT

Union Connectivity Review

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Mark Harper): I am pleased to announce the UK Government response to Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill's independent Union connectivity review.

The UK Government have a responsibility to people, businesses and communities throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. Our central mission is to deliver sustainable growth and spread opportunity right across the country. Ensuring that we have an accessible, well-connected transport system provides the foundation for achieving this goal and will support every part of the UK in reaching its potential. Our announcement today builds on our £36 billion Network North plan, helping to strengthen connections right across the UK.

Devolution has effectively supported the delivery of many place-specific transport priorities that meet the needs of local communities. It has empowered leaders to deliver solutions for their areas and brought decisions closer to the people affected by them. But it is only the UK Government that can take an overview of our entire strategic transport network. To support this, the UK Government asked Lord Hendy to lead the independent Union connectivity review, the first UK-wide multi-modal strategic transport assessment in a generation.

The Union connectivity review, and our response to it, takes a strategic approach to transport. It recognises that people's daily journeys—for work, business, leisure, education and health reasons—and the daily movement of goods regularly cross administrative boundaries. And it recognises that, as the Government for the whole of the UK, we should take a strategic approach to make those journeys work for people and business and to strengthen vital transport connections across our country. On behalf of the UK Government, I would like to thank Lord Hendy and his expert panel for their excellent work and thank the many organisations and individuals who contributed to it.

Many of Lord Hendy's recommendations relate to issues where responsibility for transport is devolved. Where this is the case, we have worked, and will continue to work, collaboratively with the devolved Administrations. While Lord Hendy's recommendations do not bring forward detailed infrastructure proposals, they do point to further work to identify where, when and what to invest in to improve connectivity and unlock growth opportunities.

In response to the Union connectivity review's recommendations, we have developed a programme of priority actions to drive forward important work identified by Lord Hendy. We have prioritised actions where we can quickly provide support for promising UK connectivity projects, strengthen working relationships with the devolved Administrations and establish the building blocks for future UK connectivity schemes. Any future investment decisions will be subject to business case.

As well as the billions being redirected from HS2 to invest in transport infrastructure and drive better connectivity, and millions of pounds of funding for reserved transport policy areas, we are designating up to £23 million of funding support for feasibility studies in devolved areas of transport responsibility in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This work will put us, devolved Administrations and local and regional partners in a strong position to assess which schemes could deliver the greatest benefits to people and businesses across the UK, informing future investment decisions about which could be progressed in the long term.

Our priority actions, which include but move beyond our Network North commitments, are:

For Wales connectivity:

Providing an unprecedented £1 billion investment to fund the electrification of the north Wales main line, bringing parts of north Wales within an hour of Manchester and bringing more punctual and reliable journeys on the 105-mile route between Crewe and Holyhead, with connections to Liverpool, Warrington and Wrexham.

Delivering the midlands rail hub in full, with investment increased to £1.75 billion to improve journey times, increase capacity and boost frequency of services, benefiting those travelling between Cardiff and Birmingham.

Providing £2.7 million to Transport for Wales to develop options for upgrades to the south Wales main line, including new stations between Cardiff and the Severn tunnel and increased services between Bristol and west Wales.

Providing £700,000 to Transport for Wales to study options for upgrading Shotton and Chester stations and increasing capacity on the north Wales main line.

For Scotland connectivity:

Committing funding to deliver targeted improvements to the A75 between Gretna and Stranraer, starting with providing £8 million to the Scottish Government to support their business case development.

Committing funding for dualling the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham, helping to improve an important route between England and Scotland.

Funding Network Rail to study options for enhancements to improve capacity and journey times on services between England and Scotland.

For Northern Ireland connectivity:

Providing £3.3 million to Translink to deliver a study on the cost, feasibility and value for money of electrification of the railway in Northern Ireland from Belfast to border.

Funding Translink to deliver a £700,000 feasibility study on reopening the Antrim-Lisburn railway line, with an additional stop at Belfast International airport.

Providing £800,000 to Translink to deliver a feasibility study on reinstating the Portadown to Armagh railway line.

Across the UK:

Reforming domestic aviation policy by changing public service obligation (PSO) policy to allow PSOs to operate to and from different regions of the UK, rather than just to and from London as is currently the case.

Reinforcing our commitment to work in partnership with the devolved Administrations through a newly relaunched inter-ministerial group for transport.

As outlined in Network North, some of these projects will be subject to business case approvals.

This programme will not be carried out in isolation. It will be supported by significant long-term work across the UK to deliver fundamental transport connectivity improvements. It will build on other UK Government initiatives, such as Network North, the levelling-up fund and investment zones, that support sustainable growth, increased prosperity and improved productivity across the UK. It will build on our approach to planning that considers land use and transport infrastructure together to deliver the widest possible benefits and unlock greater opportunity. And it will build on the UK Government's commitment to work constructively and collaboratively with the devolved Administrations across the UK to deliver on our shared ambitions.

Wherever you live, a better-connected UK will bring you closer to social and economic opportunities. That is why the UK Government are determined that our transport infrastructure supports levelling up, brings communities across the UK even closer together and facilitates economic growth by increasing access to skilled labour and opportunities. Our response to the Union connectivity review marks an important step in increasing UK connectivity, supporting growth and delivering the strong, reliable transport connections people depend on every day.

[HCWS102]

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