

Monday
11 December 2023

Volume 742
No. 20



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 11 December 2023

House of Commons

Monday 11 December 2023

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Industrial Action: Impact on Children and Parents

2. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps she is taking to help reduce the impact of industrial action by teachers on children and parents. [900555]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Last year's strikes were one of the biggest outbreaks of industrial action in a generation. Over 25 million school days were lost, with far-reaching consequences across our society. We cannot afford a repeat of that disruption, and it is my duty to protect children's education. That is why we are consulting on minimum service levels to end further disruption to education, while providing certainty to parents. MSLS will balance the right to strike with children's fundamental right to a good education.

Mark Pawsey: The issue extends to university students as well. My constituent's final degree papers were not marked this year because of industrial action. That put in jeopardy her postgraduate course and her employment offer. Her degree was issued only after her mother personally visited the dean of the university involved and demanded action. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that degree exam papers are marked on time in the current academic year?

Gillian Keegan: Our young people should never be pawns in the disputes of adults. The behaviour of University and College Union members was disgraceful, and their actions caused untold disruption and stress for thousands of students. Although the higher education sector is independent of Government, the damaging impact of strike action cannot go unchecked. That is why we are consulting on minimum service levels in this sector, unlike the Labour party, which always bows to its union paymasters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to ask a supplementary to the first question.

I am ever mindful of the importance that the industrial action finishes. Has the Secretary of State had any opportunities to discuss this with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland? I understand that she has no responsibility for Northern Ireland, but it is important that we work together to try to solve the problems of industrial action. It is affecting loads of schools, particularly those whose pupils have special educational needs. I am really concerned.

Gillian Keegan: The hon. Member puts his finger on it. Industrial action has a massive impact, particularly on vulnerable children, those with special educational needs, and those in exam cohorts. I am always happy to share with my counterparts in the devolved Administrations, and I am very happy to share what we are doing on minimum service levels.

School Funding: County Durham

3. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to ensure the adequacy of school funding in County Durham. [900556]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): Nationally, school funding will rise to over £59.6 billion next year, the highest ever in real terms per pupil. This year, the north-east had the largest percentage increase in per pupil funding in the whole of England.

Grahame Morris: I welcome the Minister to his place.

Every day is a school day, but I wonder whether the new Schools Minister is familiar with the School Cuts website, which indicates that 214 out of 240 schools in County Durham face spending cuts in 2024-25. The cumulative impact of cuts in County Durham amounts to £113 million, equating to a £175 cut per pupil. Does he believe that restricting school budgets will help or hinder the educational opportunities and life chances for children in my east Durham constituency?

Damian Hinds: I have seen the website that the hon. Member mentions. Its calculations are based on some very speculative assumptions, and the conclusions that it reaches should therefore be treated with great caution. Next year, County Durham will receive over £391 million based on current pupil numbers, which is an extra £7.8 million for schools.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Minister to his place.

On Friday, I joined Labour's candidate Alan Strickland on a visit to Ferryhill School in County Durham. The staff team and students are amazing, but staff are left teaching in portacabins, the dining room and the sports hall, the staff room is behind a curtain on a stage, and years 10 and 11 are in a different town. Last week, yet more schools were added to the list of those with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, and the Secretary of State could not confirm how many will need complete rebuilds. Given the urgency, can the Minister tell parents, children and staff when this chaos will end?

Damian Hinds: Mr Speaker, allow me to take this moment to pay tribute to all school staff, leaders, children and their families, who have shown great fortitude in dealing with the disruption caused by RAAC. We have moved quickly to make sure all schools with suspected RAAC are surveyed and to work with schools to put in place alternative arrangements. Of course none of that is perfect, but schools have shown great flexibility in working towards that, such that we now have 99% of affected schools back with full-time face-to-face education.

Childcare Support: Working Parents

4. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase childcare support for working parents. [900557]

14. **Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase childcare support for working parents. [900569]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): The Government announced earlier this year transformative reforms to childcare to benefit children, parents and the economy. By 2027-28, we expect to spend in excess of £8 billion every year on free childcare hours and early education, representing the single largest investment in childcare in England ever.

James Sunderland: In recent months, I have visited several early years providers across Bracknell Forest, where it is clear that the improved provision and ratios will make a big difference both for working families and for the providers. Could the Minister please outline what more could be done to better incentivise working parents to return to work?

David Johnston: Last week the Department for Business and Trade published its response to its consultation on flexible working, making clear that this Government are committed to changes to legislation that will enable more flexible working. Together with our expansion of childcare, that will ensure parents have more choice over how, when and where they work.

Siobhan Baillie: Welcome back, Mr Speaker.

The Early Education and Childcare Coalition has found that 57% of nursery staff and 38% of childminders are considering leaving the early years sector in the next 12 months, and Stroud businesses say the same thing. That absolutely cannot happen. They are a skilled and amazing workforce, whom parents trust with the most precious things, and the Government have backed the industry as integral to the growth strategy. What evidence does my hon. Friend have that the UK is retaining nursery staff and childminders, and what can we be doing to ensure the new system is successful?

David Johnston: I thank my hon. Friend for her work championing the early years workforce and join her in the tributes she pays to them. The total number of paid early years staff has remained stable in recent years, and between 2021 and 2022 the number of staff increased by 2%, or 5,900 people. We will publish updated statistics in the coming weeks.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not a fact that after 13 years of the Conservatives in government, our country is in a situation where preschool and out-of-school care is the most expensive in Europe and beyond? We have so many talented people—especially women, but men as well—who are not coming back to use their high skills to recharge the economy, because they cannot afford childcare. What is the Minister going to do about it?

David Johnston: What we are doing is making the single largest investment ever made in childcare. That is going to save the average family up to £6,500 per year on the cost of childcare, in contrast to the hon. Gentleman's party, which has no policy for this area whatsoever.

T-levels

5. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of students completing T-Level courses. [900558]

22. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of students completing T-level courses. [900578]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): I am very proud that more than 4,000 students now have T-levels on their CV. In the summer, 3,119 students completed their T-levels with a pass or above, meaning that we had a pass rate of 90.5% before factoring in remarking and retakes. We will publish a T-level action plan with more information early next year.

Janet Daby: In my constituency, Christ the King Emmanuel sixth form college does fantastically well in educating young people, but an Education Committee report stated that in the first year of the T-Level transition programme, just 14% of students went on to start the T-level. The Government have yet to publish the data for subsequent years. Can the Minister outline when the new data will be published and whether that progression rate has improved?

Robert Halfon: I am very glad that Christ the King Emmanuel sixth form college is offering T-levels, and that the hon. Lady has had 8,300 apprenticeship starts in her constituency since 2010. Our T-level transition year is a new thing that we have introduced—it is now called the foundation year—and very close to 50% of students go on to do a level 3. However, I said in my opening answer to her, we will have more information about these matters in the next year.

Bill Esterson: Welcome back, Mr Speaker.

According to Make UK, 36% of manufacturing vacancies are hard to fill because of a lack of skills. There are 170,000 fewer apprenticeship starts than in 2017. The Prime Minister cast doubt on the future of T-levels in his conference speech, when he said that he thought they should be scrapped. Just what is the Government's plan, or will they leave it to my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) to address the chronic shortage of technical skills over which they have presided?

Robert Halfon: I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would celebrate the 9,000-plus apprenticeship starts in his constituency since 2010. We have built our skills revolution in everything from apprenticeships and our T-level programme to our higher technical qualifications, free boot camps and free level 3 courses, and that is driving the increased skills uptake. It is worth noting that we have had 337,000 apprenticeship starts over the past year. He should welcome that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Shockingly, results last summer revealed that one in three students dropped out of their T-level course, which is higher than for earlier cohorts. Something is going very wrong. In April, the Education Committee raised major concerns about T-level roll-outs, regional variations and falling employer engagement. Access to opportunity really matters, so should the Minister not now pause and review the defunding of alternative qualifications, as Labour would, and urgently bring forward the 2023-24 T-level action plan in order to address concerns raised by the Select Committee and Ofsted and bring much-needed clarity and support for colleges, employers, parents and students?

Robert Halfon: Not content with being in the anti-apprenticeship party, given her plans to weaken the apprenticeship levy and halve the number of apprenticeships, the hon. Lady is also taking on the mantle of T-level denier. We have 18 T-levels; we have, as I mentioned, a 90.5% pass rate; we have 10,000 students doing our T-level programme; and we expect the data that we will release early next year to show that many thousands more students are doing the T-level programme.¹ I am very proud of our T-level programme. I know that the hon. Lady will be eating mince pies at Christmas, but I suggest that early next year she may be eating humble pie, because our T-level programme is something to be proud of.

After-school Childcare: Long-term Educational Outcomes

7. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): If her Department will make an assessment of the potential impact of after-school childcare on long-term educational outcomes. [900560]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): In October, the Government announced the allocation of £289 million of start-up funding to local authorities for wraparound care, which we know supports parents to work, as well as having the potential to improve attainment, engagement and attendance.²

Elliot Colburn: I recently visited Muschamp Primary School in Carshalton and Wallington, where I observed the Junior Adventures Group UK—a leading provider of school-age childcare in my constituency—in the crucial support that it gives children, particularly those with special educational needs, beyond school hours. However, it is evident that school-age childcare needs reform. I welcome that £289 million, but can my hon. Friend explain how the frameworks will ensure that that investment effectively supports families, specifically those with requirements for special educational needs and disabilities?

David Johnston: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have set out clear expectations that all wraparound provision should be inclusive and accessible. We have given local authorities flexibility in how to spend their funding, but we expect them to distribute it in a way that ensures equal access to provision for parents of children with special educational needs.

1. [Official Report, 18 December 2023, Vol. 742, c. 7MC.]

2. [Official Report, 18 December 2023, Vol. 742, c. 7MC.]

Pupils with SEN and Disabilities

8. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. [900561]

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): We want all children to receive the right support to reach their full potential. That is why, since March, we have opened 14 new special free schools, with 78 more approved; we have launched our £70 million change programme, benefiting every region in England and testing key SEND and alternative provision, including innovative approaches to speech and language therapy; and, to help young people with special educational needs into work, we are doubling the number of supported internships to 4,500 by 2025. By next year, we will have increased high-needs funding by 60%, to over £10.5 billion, in just five years.

Sarah Green: Last year in Buckinghamshire, one in three education, health and care plans were issued outside the legally required 20-week timeframe. Will the Secretary of State outline what concrete steps the Department is taking to improve access to educational psychologists and reduce waiting times for EHCPs?

Gillian Keegan: I know how hard parents fight to get the right support for their children. Sometimes that takes too long, and I am determined to make that easier, which is why we are simplifying and standardising the EHCP process. However, to deliver that support, we need our fantastic teachers, teaching assistants and specialist SEND teachers; without them, we could not provide children with the support they require. That is why we are boosting training opportunities through a new national professional qualification for special educational needs co-ordinators, which will be launched in autumn 2024, and investing a further £21 million to train 400 more educational psychologists. We are also training up to 7,000 early years specialists, over 5,000 of whom have begun their training. We now have 280,000 teaching assistants in our schools, an increase of over 60,000 since we have been in office.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): One in 10 children in education in my constituency receives special educational needs support. Thanks to the Department for Education, we have had a new special school, the Austen Academy—that is a free school—and significant increases in budgets, but can we also ensure that teaching children with special needs is a mainstream part of teacher education? Supporting children with special educational needs every day is now a mainstream part of school.

Gillian Keegan: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. That is exactly why we are developing a new NPQ for SENCOs, which will launch in autumn 2024, and are inputting into the standards for teacher training to ensure that everybody has an understanding of how best to support children. There are now a lot of children with special educational needs, and we all need to know how to support them better.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): From my citywide consultation of parents of children with SEND, it came to light that the particularly harsh and punitive disciplinary processes being exercised in schools

are having a very harmful effect on many of those children. Will the Secretary of State or the Schools Minister meet me to discuss a particular multi-academy trust in my constituency where those processes are having a very negative impact on young people?

Gillian Keegan: I am very happy to confirm that the Minister for children and families will be happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Sir Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in thanking Julie Nixon, head of the Spectrum of Light charity in Rossendale and Darwen, for the work she did on Saturday by bringing together parents from across Lancashire and Rossendale and Darwen on a Zoom call? Those parents were exactly the same as me, in that they all had an autistic child, and I was appalled to hear from them about the time they are having to wait to see an educational psychologist. Will the Secretary of State agree to write to Lancashire County Council to find out what the heck is going on with those parents whose children are missing school and are unable to access an education, health and care plan?

Gillian Keegan: I am very happy to work with my right hon. Friend to improve things in Lancashire. Spectrum of Light sounds like it is doing an amazing job—there are many people who are looking to better support our children with special educational needs. Of course, we recognise that we need to improve aspects, which is why we published an improvement plan in March this year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Would-be educational psychology trainees for September 2024 have been left in limbo because of delays in the Department confirming the available funding. The number of educational psychologists has fallen since 2010, despite requests for education, health and care plans increasing every year. That national shortage of qualified practitioners is contributing to the crisis in SEND that is affecting so many families across the country. Does the Secretary of State agree that this uncertainty about Government funding for educational psychology training is unacceptable, and when does she expect it to be resolved?

Gillian Keegan: We announced in November 2022 that a further £21 million was going to be spent to train more than 400 educational psychologists.

Pupils with SEN and Disabilities

9. **Mrs Paulette Hamilton** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce waiting times for children with special educational needs and disabilities to receive support. [900562]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): In our improvement plan, we set out plans to deliver consistent early support through our new national standards, backed by a 60% increase in high-needs funding and in programmes such as our £13 million investment in the Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools programme, which supports the needs of neurodiverse children.

Mrs Hamilton: More than half of children with an education, health and care plan are now experiencing a delay, and even after receiving an EHCP, my constituent's child was held back a year and had to wait another year before finding a space in a special school. Over 1.5 million children in the UK have special educational needs, so can the Minister tell me what he is doing to ensure that parents and children such as my constituents get the support they need quickly?

David Johnston: We are investing £2.6 billion to transform the special educational needs and alternative provision system. That has included a 36% increase in funding to Birmingham, where the timeliness of EHCPs has been getting better each year between 2020 and 2022.¹

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Beyond the traditional methods of support for SEND, the Minister will know that councils give specialist provisions, and we have heard a lot today about some of those longer-term provisions, for children in particular, and the time involved. What assessment does the Department make when looking at the distance that some of these children need to travel to get this specialist support, particularly when it is out of county—for example, Shropshire into Staffordshire? It may not seem a long distance, but on some of those meandering, serpentine roads it can take a very long time to travel 20 miles.

David Johnston: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Out of county placements are not ideal for the child and their family or for the cost to the local authority, which is why we have 78 new special schools in fruition. We are also committed to seeing the children whose needs can be met in a mainstream school being supported at an early enough stage with their special educational needs.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Francois.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Sir. It is good to see you back safe and well in the Chair. As this is the nearest I am ever going to get to it—No. 10, please! [*Laughter.*]

Special Needs Education: Access

10. **Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to special needs education. [900563]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): I wondered what was happening there, Mr Speaker.

As part of our £2.6 billion investment to reform the SEND and AP system, we have announced 41 new special free schools, with a further 37 in the pipeline. We have also set out plans for new national standards to make clear the support that should be available in mainstream settings for children with special educational needs.

Mr Speaker: When did the vacancy come at No. 10?

Mr Francois: Can I take this opportunity quickly to thank the Secretary of State, her junior Ministers and officials for all the help for the schools affected by RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—in my constituency?

1. [*Official Report, 18 December 2023, Vol. 742, c. 8MC.*]

Turning to SEN, demand in Essex far outstrips supply. The Secretary of State will know that just prior to the summer recess, I launched a campaign for a new SEN school in south Essex. I am delighted to tell her that we have a trust that is seriously interested, we may have a site and we may even have some money. On that basis, could I meet her or one of her junior Ministers—early in the new year, please—to update her on where we have got to and to ask for help to make this dream a reality?

David Johnston: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his campaign, with which we are very familiar in the Department; we would be delighted to meet him. Where local authorities do feel there is a need, they can open a new special school through the free school presumption route, which I would be happy to discuss with him further.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister mentioned the £2.6 billion that the Government have invested, but this is not filtering down. That is the key issue for parents accessing SEN provision, and so many parents are raising it at my surgery. One concerned mother told me:

“Parents and children are being put under intolerable stress and anxiety with a system which is inefficient and creating a significant mental health burden”.

The Minister mentioned the national standards. Will the standards include the fact that SEN children and children with autism are being arrested and their mental health is not being treated properly because schools simply do not have enough training and support? Will the Minister please address that?

David Johnston: I thank the hon. Lady. We are keen that schools are as inclusive as they say they will be when it comes to children with special educational needs. We have nine change programme partnerships to try to make sure that the system works a lot better. The money is given to local authorities, and we should already be seeing an improvement, but I would be happy to discuss it further with her.

Local Skills Needs: Education Providers and Businesses

11. **Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that tertiary and technical education providers work with businesses to meet local skills needs. [900564]

16. **Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help ensure that tertiary and technical education providers work with businesses to meet local skills needs. [900572]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): We are transforming skills through our local skills improvement plans, backed by £165 million and supported by business, further education and higher education, and though a £300 million investment in institutes of technology, which are collaborations between business, higher education and further education to revolutionise our tertiary education offering.

Jack Brereton: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Stoke-on-Trent College has recently launched its new “Skills Ready, Future Ready” strategy and has been working with a number of employers locally to fill skills shortages, and it is very welcome to see the local skills improvement fund investment of around £3 million

for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, but given our industries locally and the skills shortages, we need to go further, so what will my right hon. Friend be doing to help fill some of those skills shortages—to support our industries to help people earn better wages and get skilled now?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is a true champion of skills in Stoke-on-Trent and, as he mentioned, we strongly support the £3.2 million we are investing through the local skills improvement fund. That is underpinned by £3.8 billion of additional national investment and my hon. Friend will be pleased to know we will be opening the Stoke-on-Trent Staffordshire institute of technology in September 2024, with £13 million of capital funding as part of our revolution in tertiary education.

Greg Smith: My constituency is at the beating heart of motorsport valley and it is critical for motorsport’s future success that we get skills training and education right for young people who want to go into that sector. The Grand Prix Trust is supporting that effort, having launched a £100,000 annual bursary scheme to help disadvantaged college students become part of the dynamic British motorsport sector, a partnership with the National College for Motorsport and Silverstone University Technical College. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming this fantastic initiative, and tell me what more he can do to help promote this important work?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend highlights the skills revolution we are having in this country, and the initiatives he has mentioned increase the collaboration between business and skills providers to help disadvantaged students in his constituency to climb the ladder of opportunity in a high-profile industry. I extend my thanks to Pat Symonds, chief technical officer of Formula 1, and Martin Brundle, chairman of the GPT trustees. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the South Central Institute of Technology based in Milton Keynes is also exploring opportunities to work with motorsport in the area.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Plymouth is home to world-class skills in marine and nuclear engineering. Demand for apprentices in our city is growing, especially with the construction of new berths and docks for nuclear submarines at Devonport dockyard. Does the Minister agree that skills training and apprenticeships are just as important as new cranes and new docks in making these projects a success and supporting our armed forces, and will he meet me, a delegation of Plymouth businesses, our city council and City College Plymouth to look at how we can turbocharge creating more apprenticeships in our city to deliver these exciting and innovative projects?

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased that his constituency has received over 14,910 apprenticeship starts since 2010, which is really good news, but he is absolutely right that our skills offering is the key for future employment and jobs and to ensure people climb the ladder of opportunity. We have the apprenticeships, the bootcamps, the higher technical qualification and the free level 3 courses, but I will look at what he says and would be happy to meet him and other Plymouth MPs to work through the important issues he mentions.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Tertiary education providers are themselves businesses that seek to meet local skills needs, and the University of Exeter is no different. It hosts international students who contribute £486 million to Devon's economy. People in Devon do not think of these students as immigrants, given how this funding helps boost skills among local people, so will the Minister talk to his counterparts in the Home Office about taking students out of the net migration figures?

Robert Halfon: As a former Exeter University student myself, I know how brilliant it is, and it also has a huge and incredibly successful programme of degree apprenticeships. I am very supportive of international students; they bring a lot of income to our country. Visa matters are always matters for the Home Office but I am sure there will be discussions about the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman.

School Support Staff Vacancies: Trends

12. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of support staff vacancies in schools. [900567]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): Support staff play a vital role in our schools. We have given schools the freedom to recruit the staff they require to meet their own needs; although we do not collect central data on vacancies as a result, I can tell the hon. Lady that the number of support staff working in schools has increased for the past three years.

Cat Smith: We have already heard in this Question Time about delays in getting the education, health and care plans in Lancashire. As a consequence, rural schools like Quernmore, which I had the privilege of visiting on Friday, are left with more children with special educational needs in mainstream but without the financial support package that should come with that. These small rural schools are therefore having to support children with additional needs and do not always have the right number of staff to be able to do so in the way they would like. Is support available to rural and small schools, especially in Lancashire, to meet the needs of all children?

Damian Hinds: We must meet the needs of all children; and at some level, every teacher is a teacher of special educational needs and disabilities. I recognise that there can be particular difficulties for smaller schools in rural areas, as the hon. Member mentions. We have the wider EHCP system, which is better than the previous system. On places available in special schools, where children are in mainstream schools, I recognise the central role played by teaching assistants. That is why we have set out in the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan how we will look to consolidate that position and give further advice on the best deployment of TAs.

Teacher Workload

13. **Mrs Flick Drummond** (Meon Valley) (Con): What steps she is taking to help reduce the workload of teachers. [900568]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): Reducing unnecessary workload is a priority for the Department and for me. We have convened a workload reduction taskforce of experts, teaching unions and practitioners to make recommendations on how to minimise workload for teachers and school leaders.

Mrs Drummond: It is good to see you back, Mr Speaker, and looking so well.

The last-minute nature of Ofsted inspections is causing huge anxiety to my small rural schools in Meon Valley. That means that teachers and in particular headteachers are putting off activities, such as residential school trips, educational trips and professional development courses, in case they get that call from Ofsted. Will my right hon. Friend consider changing the notice period for inspections so that teachers can plan their workload better?

Damian Hinds: I value all those activities that my hon. Friend sets out that schools undertake for their children. Like her, I represent a rural constituency—indeed, we have next-door constituencies. I recognise what she says about small rural schools. Inspections have an important role to play, but Ofsted also has the flexibility in the framework to take account of the particular position of smaller schools.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Teacher workloads are being exacerbated by teacher vacancies that schools are struggling to fill, and funding pressures are resulting in cuts to support staff, who often support the most vulnerable and needy children. That is leading to an exodus of teachers from our schools. Just last week, we saw the staggering figures from the Government that teacher training recruitment targets have been missed by a whopping 50% in our secondary schools, with the sharpest fall in maths, which is allegedly a priority for the Prime Minister. How bad does it have to get before the Government will produce and implement a proper workforce strategy?

Damian Hinds: I can confirm that there are 27,000 more teachers and 60,000 more teaching assistants in our schools compared with 2010. We have the most talented generation of teachers ever, and we continue to focus on a strong recruitment and retention strategy, so that we continue to get the best talent to teach our children.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The workload and stress levels of teachers rise exponentially during an inspection. I am sure that the Minister will join me in offering condolences to the friends and family of Ruth Perry. In the light of the coroner's verdict that the "rude and intimidating" nature of the Ofsted inspection contributed to Ruth Perry's tragic suicide, how is the Minister ensuring the welfare of school leaders is prioritised during inspections?

Damian Hinds: I of course extend my condolences to the friends and family of Ruth Perry. It was the most awful tragedy. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will say a word on that tragedy and Ofsted in a moment. For now, let me just say that of course the

inspection framework and process must both be fully informative to parents, and supportive to teachers and schools.

Free School Meals: Impact on Children and Parents

15. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent assessment her Department has made of the impact of free school meals on children and their parents. [900571]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): Free school meals support disadvantaged families to the value of £480 a year, ensuring that eligible pupils receive a healthy, nutritious meal. The Government have expanded free school meals more than any other in recent decades; now, more than a third of pupils in England receive them, compared with a sixth in 2010.

Mrs Murray: Recently, we have had high food inflation. While I welcome the fact that the Government have now halved inflation, one of my small schools has told me that it is unable to provide free meals within the money allocated, as it cannot benefit from the same economies of scale as larger schools. Will my right hon. Friend review the funds available for small schools?

Damian Hinds: I acknowledge my hon. Friend's point. The national funding formula recognises that some schools are necessarily small and do not have the same opportunities to realise economies of scale. Every school receives a lump sum, irrespective of its size—£134,000 for next year—and the Government have reformed the sparsity factor, increasing funding for that from £42 million in 2021-22 to £98 million in 2024-25.

Higher Education Institutions: International Students

17. **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of trends in the level of university applications from international students on the long-term sustainability of higher education institutions. [900573]

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): I am pleased that we have surpassed our target, with well over 600,000 international students. They remain an important source of income and a source of pride for our universities, and the total impact of international students was worth £37 billion across the duration of their studies.

Dame Nia Griffith: As the Minister has just mentioned, the economic benefit of overseas students is some £37.4 billion spread between universities and economies across the UK, but applications in this UCAS admissions round are down. With increasingly stiff competition from elsewhere, UK institutions cannot simply rely on their excellent reputations, so what more can the Minister do to ensure that the UK remains an attractive place for international students to study?

Robert Halfon: As I said to the hon. Lady, we have something like 689,000 international students and our target is 600,000 a year.¹ We are working very closely with Sir Steve Smith. We want to diversify to a whole range of different countries to advertise ourselves to

international students but, as I say, the trends are good. The hundreds of thousands of international students who are here benefit our economy and provide an important source of income for universities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Matt Western.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It is great to see you, Mr Speaker.

As well as contributing to Britain's world-leading research, the financial contribution of international students is vital to UK universities, particularly at a time of rising cost pressures and real-terms fee value erosion. Any sudden changes in the number of international students coming to the UK obviously puts the higher education sector at risk. The Minister speaks of his pride, but I would like to stress the point and ensure that he puts this on record. Can he absolutely give his assurance to the House that the Government remain robust in their ambition to continue to attract 600,000 international students a year, as laid out in the international education strategy?

Robert Halfon: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's question. I am absolutely committed to the target of 600,000. As I said in response to the previous question, we have surpassed that, with well over 680,000 students.¹ As I say, they are of benefit to our universities and our economy, and they are a very important source of income for all our higher education institutions.

Violence in Classrooms

19. **Michael Shanks** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of trends in the level of violence in classrooms. [900575]

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): Of course, no one should face violence in school. In England, we have taken decisive action to improve pupils' behaviour through strengthening the behaviour in schools guidance and investing in giving support and propagating best practice through the behaviour hubs.

Michael Shanks: The latest PISA figures, which were released in the last few weeks, show a stark picture of violence in schools across the whole UK. Nowhere else in the OECD do rates of violence reach anywhere near the levels in the UK. Pupils are almost twice as likely as the OECD average to witness a fight in their school—39% in England and 36% in Scotland—and, as a teacher, I can say from experience that violence in schools disrupts every part of pupils' learning. Exclusion clearly is not working, and the Scottish Government's recently announced proposal in Scotland is to put all the responsibility on teachers. What more can the Government do to illustrate a way forward for schools to deal with this problem, so that young people's learning is not hampered by violence in the classroom?

Damian Hinds: For completeness, we ought to note that the PISA study noted that the great majority of pupils in England reported feeling safe in school—very similar to the OECD average—and were less likely than the OECD average to see the most serious manifestations of such behaviour, such as seeing gangs at school or seeing somebody with a weapon.

It is absolutely true that schools must have the full range of measures at their disposal. There is no right level of exclusion, and it should not be used lightly, but it has to be there; it has to be available. Early in our time in government, we made it clear that teachers can use reasonable force. We also extended searching powers, removed the requirement to give parents 24 hours' written notice for after-school detentions and simplified advice on how to prevent and tackle bullying, because a safe and ordered environment is essential for both children's education and their general wellbeing.

Topical Questions

T1. [900579] **Simon Jupp** (East Devon) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Ruth Perry's death was a tragedy that left a hole in the hearts of her family, her community and her school. Throughout this year, I have been honoured to work closely with Ruth's sister Julia and her friends Lisa and Edmund to introduce important changes to inspection practice alongside Ofsted, which ensure that headteachers can share their inspection outcome, including with colleagues, friends and family. Our new changes mean that if a school is graded "inadequate" due to ineffective safeguarding but all other judgments are "good", it will be reinspected within three months. That has now happened at Caversham Primary School, which was regraded as "good" this summer. We also doubled the wellbeing support for our school leaders. In life, Ruth dedicated herself to her school, and we will build on her legacy to help ensure that such a tragedy never happens again.

Simon Jupp: I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement; I agree with those sentiments.

This Conservative Government will fund a new school to replace the flood-prone Tipton St John Primary School, which has had to close three times this year and had another near miss last week due to intense heavy rainfall. It is vital that spades are in the ground next year for the new school. Will she meet me to discuss this urgent matter further?

Gillian Keegan: Our school rebuilding programme is transforming 500 schools across England, and I am delighted that Tipton St John Primary School is one of them. The school is currently in a flood zone and was impacted by the recent storms. We are working actively with the diocese of Exeter and Devon local authority to identify suitable sites for the school. I am happy to agree to meet my hon. Friend very soon.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): May I start by again sending my condolences and those of the entire Labour party to the family of Ruth Perry? We must all now listen and learn to deliver an inspection system that works in the best interests of children, school staff and communities.

The Education Secretary has said that her Government are doing everything to get children into school, yet this term the attendance rate has declined consistently, hitting a terrible new low in the latest figures. Is not the real truth simply that the Government see attendance as a problem affecting other people's children?

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely not—attendance is my No. 1 priority. I regularly meet and chair the attendance action alliance group, and we are determined to help ensure that children are in school, because that is where they can get the best education. We are working with GPs and other medical professionals to ensure that everybody is aware that, first, school is a good place to be—actually, a better place to be—for those with mild anxiety and, secondly, we are there to give support in school, and we want everybody to be in school. Those efforts are starting to pay off—we now have 380,000 fewer children missing school—but it is very much at the top of my agenda.

Bridget Phillipson: If it is the Secretary of State's No. 1 priority, why is she not legislating for a register of children not in school? That measure has wide support right across this House, but it was missing from the King's Speech despite the Secretary of State's repeated promises to legislate, despite it having been in the Government's abandoned Schools Bill and despite it being in her Department's submission, according to the permanent secretary at the Department. Will the Secretary of State confirm, as the permanent secretary suggested, that it was blocked by No. 10?

Gillian Keegan: No, absolutely not. Of course, more things go into King's Speeches than there is legislative time; that is a process that the permanent secretary laid out. But it is my priority, and I hope to legislate on it in the very short term.

T2. [900580] **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): I heard from a school in my constituency last week that, even though it has six school counsellors, there is a long waiting list for children with mental health concerns to see a counsellor. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that schools are adequately resourced to best support pupils in that regard?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. We know that school-based provision works best when all staff are clear about how to support mental health, which is why we are providing senior mental health lead training grants to all state schools, 14,400 of which have claimed a grant so far. We are also working with the Department of Health and Social Care to extend mental health support teams to cover at least 50% of pupils by spring 2025.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): If there is to be hope for a peaceful solution in the Israel-Gaza conflict, the input of Palestinian academics will be crucial, but many have already lost of their lives. Could the Minister make a statement about representations that he has made to Cabinet colleagues about introducing an emergency humanitarian visa for academics in Gaza?

David Johnston: I will write to the hon. Lady about that.

T3. [900581] **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): Parental choice is crucial, is it not? To that end, when will wave 16 of the free school programme open?

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour has been a long-time champion on this matter, and I know his local work well. There are 701 free schools open, and a further 140-plus are in the pipeline. There is a current round of applications for consideration of special and alternative provision free schools, but further capital would be a matter for future spending reviews.

T6. [900584] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Reclaim): The independent review of relationships, sex and health education in schools submitted its recommendations to the Secretary of State back in September. When will those recommendations be made public? If they are not to be made public, why not?

Damian Hinds: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are conducting a review of RSHE guidance. These are important and sensitive topics and it is important to get them right. He will not have long to wait to see the results.

T4. [900582] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): The Secretary of State will be familiar with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in Essex, and I thank her and her ministerial team for their support. Can she give an assurance that contractors such as Mitie, employed to build a temporary accommodation unit for local schools, are working with schools to deliver programmes on time and to meet their needs? Right now, we are seeing delays that are affecting the educational outcomes of local children.

Gillian Keegan: The temporary classrooms at St Andrew's Junior School were delivered by Essex County Council, which I thank once again for its exemplary leadership managing RAAC in Essex. The Department is working closely with all parties to ensure that any concerns are addressed quickly. Work is ongoing today to fix a disabled access door. I can confirm that we will remove RAAC from all schools and colleges. Settings will be offered either grant funding or rebuilding projects. We are assessing the right solution for each case and we will update the House shortly.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): Swallowfield Primary School has a space-constrained site in my constituency, and relies on temporary accommodation to provide important special educational needs and disabilities interventions for pupils. However, because of an inadvertent breach of section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, it has had a loss of space and may lose that unit because of the compromising effect on outdoor space. Given that the space lost could never have been used for recreational purposes—

Mr Speaker: Order. These are topical questions.

Damian Hinds: It sounds like there are important details to get to grips with, so I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

T5. [900583] **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): The Government are rightly focusing on technical as well as academic education with the new British standard. University technical college sleeves would support the Government to enhance pre-16 technical education in secondary schools. Will the extra £50 million made available for technical education in schools in the autumn statement be available for UTC sleeves?

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): My hon. Friend is a champion for UTCs and technical education. I am delighted that the Secretary of State recently approved two more UTCs. A couple of weeks ago I visited the brilliant Harlow BMAT STEM Academy, which is a UTC, and UTC Portsmouth. We will respond shortly to Lord Baker's request for a UTC sleeve pilot, as she mentioned.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): Corpus Christi junior school on Brixton Hill has been closed since July due to RAAC. We now have tenders approved for the significant works that the Department for Education said were necessary and that it would pay for, but they must begin in January to ensure that they are completed in time. Could the Secretary of State explain why, despite repeated requests, her Department has still not approved the necessary funding? Any further delay could mean that my young constituents are left with further disruption and no building to learn in for the next academic year.

Damian Hinds: We are, as the hon. Lady will know, committed to ensure that reasonable costs for temporary accommodation and so on are covered in the immediate term and beyond, to make sure that capital costs are covered for either refurbishment or, in some cases, rebuild. There will be further detail to come before long.

T9. [900588] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): England has shot up the international rankings in education, but schools in Wales have not. Does that not show that Conservative education reforms are helping kids to thrive in schools in England?

Gillian Keegan: Yes. We have to compare and contrast that with Wales, which has the lowest educational standards in the UK. The simple answer to why that is, is that it is run by Labour. Under Labour, our education standards plummeted from eighth to 27th in maths, from seventh to 25th in reading and from fourth to 16th in science. Thanks to the hard work of our teachers and pupils, and the reforms under this Conservative Government, we have rocketed back up the tables to 11th for maths and 13th for reading and science. Every time Labour gets power, education standards fall. The Conservatives are the only ones taking the long-term decisions to deliver a better education for our children.

Mr Speaker: Please work with me to enable everybody to get in.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Despite my private Member's Bill on statutory guidance to reduce the cost of school uniforms—the Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act 2021—far too many schools require a plethora of logos and branded items. When can we expect more robust intervention from Ministers to deal with this issue?

Damian Hinds: Schools should be reasonable in what they do and that is what our guidance sets out.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): Staff at Bramhall High School have worked extremely hard to maintain the education of students following the discovery of RAAC. I am grateful for the support given by the

Department and Stockport Council to ensure that temporary classrooms will be in place in the new year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the headteacher and the staff for all their hard work? Given the existing condition of the school, will he join me in calling for it to be included in a new build programme?

Mr Speaker: Can you just help me to get through? Members have not got in yet and I really do want to help everybody.

Damian Hinds: I join my hon. Friend in thanking and paying tribute to all the staff, children and families at Bramhall High Street. She is a great advocate for them. Schools and colleges will be offered either capital grants to fund refurbishment or permanently remove RAAC, or rebuilding projects where they are needed.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Last week, the Government published an update of the list of schools with RAAC. Will the Minister confirm that the Department is seeking to cross-check its list of schools affected by RAAC with the BBC, because it remains the case that the BBC journalists have more of a grip on this crisis than the Government?

Damian Hinds: We have a lot of people working on this and rightly so, including making sure that all the surveys get done. We have also committed to being transparent, which is why we publish regular updates to the list. We continue to work at pace to try to resolve the problems as quickly as possible for the good of the children.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Malvern College in my constituency employs hundreds of local people, supports the local economy, earns export earnings for our country, ensures that people around the world love the UK, and is a huge supporter of our local schools. What kind of destructive ideology would put all that at risk and make the UK the only country in the world to tax education?

Gillian Keegan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a dreadful policy and it will have exactly the opposite impact. It will probably actually cost money and mean children moving schools, and all because the Labour party just plays the politics of envy.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I offer my deepest condolences to the family of Ruth Perry. Following the inquest last week, will the Secretary of State now consider the removal of the single-word judgment from Ofsted inspection reports?

Gillian Keegan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and for arranging the initial meetings with Julia Waters—Ruth's sister, who I know is his constituent—and attending the first few. I will be working very closely with the new chief inspector of schools when he starts three weeks today to see what more we can do, but we must remember that Ofsted plays an important role in keeping children safe and standards high.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I ask everyone to help me out in future, please? Some may not realise that topical questions are meant to be speedy, so that all Members can be accommodated.

Israel-Hamas War: Diplomacy

3.30 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the international diplomacy surrounding the Israel-Hamas war.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. The Government are undertaking extensive and global diplomatic engagement to get much greater aid into Gaza, support British nationals and the safe return of hostages, and prevent dangerous regional escalation. Days after Hamas's brutal attack, the then Foreign Secretary was in Israel to see for himself the devastation wrought by this heinous act of terrorism, and his successor visited in late November to continue dialogue with Israeli leaders. Last week the Prime Minister discussed the latest efforts to free hostages with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and stressed the need to take greater care to protect civilians in Gaza. Two days later, the Foreign Secretary discussed the future of the middle east peace process with the US Secretary of State in Washington.

The situation in Gaza cannot continue, and we are deploying all our diplomatic resources, including in the United Nations, to help to find a viable solution. The scale of civilian deaths and displacement in Gaza is shocking. Although Israel has the right to defend itself against terror, restore its security and bring the hostages home, it must abide by international law and take all possible measures to protect civilians. We have called for further and longer humanitarian pauses. It is imperative that we increase the flow of aid into Gaza, but as we have said at the UN, calling for a ceasefire ignores the fact that Hamas has committed acts of terror and continues to hold civilian hostages.

We remain committed to making progress towards a two-state solution. Britain's long-standing position on the middle east peace process is clear: we support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state.

Mr Lammy: I know that you continue with your best endeavours, Mr Speaker, but when it comes to a matter as important as this, I think we see why it is so problematic that the Foreign Secretary is not in this House.

The scale of death and destruction seen in Gaza over the last two months has been intolerable: the children left under the rubble, the families displaced from their homes, and the many innocent Palestinians facing the threat of starvation and disease. Despite international pressure on Israel to change the way it is fighting—to not replicate the kind of devastating tactics that it used in the north, to protect schools and hospitals, and to ensure that humanitarian aid is ramped up—Labour shares grave concerns that those conditions are not being met.

Diplomacy, not bombs and bullets, is the only route to a lasting peace. The grave warnings from the United Nations cannot be ignored, and they show the urgent need for action to relieve the suffering. It is right that the UN Security Council has been debating this war, but it constitutes a failure that it has been unable to reach a consensus and to speak with a collective voice.

Labour wants a resolution to pass the UN Security Council—a resolution that properly condemns Hamas terrorists and the appalling 7 October attacks on Israel, and calls for the release of all hostages; a resolution that demands a renewed cessation of hostilities and the protection of Palestinian civilians; a resolution that acts as a stepping-stone towards an enduring end to this war.

We cannot give up. Too much is at stake. Can the Minister explain what steps he will now take to help reach that consensus? Can he update the House on any progress to open up the second crossing at Kerem Shalom? International diplomacy must focus on Gaza, but it must also focus on further escalation in the west bank and the wider region, including Lebanon. Will the Government therefore increase pressure on the Israeli Government in the west bank by imposing travel bans on illegal settlers involved in attacks, serious criminal activity and the fostering of hatred? Will he say unequivocally, like Labour, that we will not tolerate the expulsion of the people of Gaza or the west bank, and that they must be able to return to their homes? Finally, will the Minister and the Government back Labour's call for a joint western and Arab-led international contact group to replace the defunct Quartet?

Mr Mitchell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. I recognise the enormous authority that Lord Cameron holds in these matters and the right hon. Gentleman's request that he should be available in the House. I will do my best to satisfy him on the questions that he has asked. As he knows, Lord Cameron is keen to engage with the House of Commons in every possible way.

The right hon. Gentleman asked why Britain did not support the UN Security Council resolution. I can tell him clearly that there was a lot good stuff in the resolution that Britain does support, but there was no condemnation of Hamas, and for that reason we felt unable to support it. However, we did not oppose it, because it had a lot of useful and important stuff in it, and we therefore abstained. He will recall that there have been a number of resolutions. We voted yes to the UN resolution drafted by the Americans, but that was vetoed by China and Russia, apparently because they could not bring themselves to condemn what Hamas had done on 7 October.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me about settler violence. The targeted killings of civilians are completely abhorrent and we are seeking that those responsible should be not just arrested but prosecuted and punished. On his comment about travel bans, I can tell him that planning is going on. The Foreign Secretary discussed this with his US counterpart last week and I hope it may be possible to say something about that shortly. The right hon. Gentleman also asked about Kerem Shalom. I think that the position of Kerem Shalom is being enhanced at the moment and I hope very much that that will lead to some facilitation, but those discussions are ongoing at this time.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I am sure that the Minister will want to condemn the gratuitous signs of antisemitism that we saw on the streets again this weekend, which led to Karen Pollock from the Holocaust Educational Trust describing London as "a no-go zone for Jewish people".

[Andrew Percy]

I know that he will want to condemn that. On the broader issue of a negotiated ceasefire, will he confirm that the Government's position is as it has been throughout—namely, that Hamas can play no role in the future of the governance of Gaza and that it is Hamas who are responsible for what is happening in Gaza today?

Mr Mitchell: I very much agree with what my hon. Friend has said. On his point about a ceasefire, at the moment a ceasefire is wholly implausible. First of all, Hamas would not agree to one. They have made it absolutely clear that they want to replicate the terrible acts that took place on 7 October, so I fear that that is not going to happen. That is why we call for extended humanitarian pauses, and as I understand it, that remains the position of His Majesty's Official Opposition.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): Humanitarian aid agencies are now repeatedly warning in strong and unmistakable terms that they simply cannot fulfil their mandate in Gaza. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency has said that Gaza is “hell on earth”. Over 2 million Palestinians now need food assistance. What the hell are the UK Government doing allowing people to starve to death when they could do something about it? What in God's name makes them think it is acceptable to stand by as more than 49,000 people are injured and the hospitals that would have treated them are being bombed and starved of supplies, when they could have an influence over that? How on earth have we reached a time when 18,000 people have been slaughtered in Gaza by Government say-so and still they are not calling for a ceasefire? Do they know that thousands of people in the UK are now screaming in horror at their TV screens because they just cannot believe what they are witnessing in Gaza, and that they are stunned by the UK's response, which is to say that Israel has the right to defend itself? All countries have the right to defend themselves, but how can killing the former Glasgow University student Dima Alhaj and her six-month-old baby ever be described as self-defence? Why did the UK abstain on the UN resolution calling for a ceasefire? The former Home Secretary called that disappointing. I call it shameful.

Mr Mitchell: I recognise the passion with which the hon. Lady speaks, but I have explained in some detail why the Government felt it was not possible to support the resolution. We did not oppose it; we abstained.

I urge the hon. Lady to think again, as a ceasefire is wholly implausible. It is much more sensible to try to get these humanitarian pauses, where we have seen some success. We urgently need to see more, for the reasons she set out so eloquently.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Prime Minister has repeatedly expressed his unequivocal support for Israel's right to defend itself. May I urge the Government to maintain that position, to stay the course and to ensure that we continue to give Israel our strong support?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have made it clear that Israel has every right to defend itself, but that it must abide by international humanitarian law and the laws of war.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): It is

“wrong and illegal to target civilians...international law is very clear that there mustn't be the targeting of civilians”.

Those are not my words, but the words of the new Foreign Secretary, and then Prime Minister, during the 2014 war in Gaza. Given that over 10,000 Palestinian children alone have been killed, can the Minister confirm whether the Foreign Secretary, and therefore this Conservative Government, still believes that Israel's targeting of civilians is wrong and illegal? What steps is he taking to hold the Israeli Government to account?

Mr Mitchell: Again, I recognise the integrity with which the hon. Gentleman speaks. I can tell him that, no, the Israeli Government never target civilians, but they are pursuing a strategy of degrading and eliminating the appalling perpetrators and the military machine that wrought the terrible disaster that took place on 7 October, which I remind him was a pogrom. More Jewish people were killed on that day than on any single day since the holocaust in 1945.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Even if the Foreign Secretary were at the Dispatch Box today, I doubt if he would do a better job than my right hon. Friend. Can he say whether the Government have made any estimate of the number of Hamas fighters who have been killed? We seem to get very precise estimates of the number of civilians who have been killed but, clearly, a large number of Hamas fighters are engaged in opposing Israeli forces on the ground. Are any other people, other than Hamas fighters, resisting Israeli forces on the ground?

Mr Mitchell: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind personal remarks. Truth is often the first casualty in war, and none of the figures that we are hearing can be relied upon.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Words now fail to describe the despondency felt by those of us who stand for peace. When I say “us” I do not just mean those of Palestinian descent; I also mean people in Israel who have fought for peace over many years. The only way to have a lasting peace—a peace without fear—is to have two states, so I will repeat the question that I put last time: what are this Government doing? Later today, I will table a Bill to recognise Palestine. Will the Minister meet me to discuss it? How do we prevent this from happening ever again?

Mr Mitchell: I will, of course, be very pleased to meet the hon. Lady. We have previously discussed the contents of the Bill in another situation, but I will be very pleased to meet her.

We are developing proposals. The hon. Lady specifically asks what we are doing and, obviously, we are trying to lift people's eyes to the political track that will, at some point, be possible. We are looking in detail at developing proposals for support for the Palestinian Authority to build up the sinews of statehood, in pursuit of the established policy of both the major political parties in this House that there should be a two-state solution, with Israel living behind secure borders and Palestine as a free and independent state.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The Minister did say that too many Palestinians have died in pursuit of a solution to the Hamas problem, but I wondered: does he genuinely believe, and is it the Government's position, that a military solution—a military defeat of Hamas—is possible?

Mr Mitchell: I have no doubt that it is possible to degrade and stop the military machine that wrought the terrible disaster on 7 October. When addressing an ideology, however, it is extremely important to recognise that a political process is absolutely essential. That is why the Government are spending, along with our allies, enormous amounts of time in trying to work through how that could be achieved.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Shamefully, our Government refused to back the ceasefire at the UN Security Council last week, when a motion was supported by 100 countries, including France, Spain and Portugal, among other European nations. In the face of the indiscriminate killing and suffering that we are seeing day after day in Gaza, is it not a failure of moral leadership to refuse to back a ceasefire? Will this constant refusal to back a ceasefire not be seen as giving the green light to Israel to commit yet more war crimes?

Mr Mitchell: I think the hon. Gentleman would receive the same response from those on his own Front Bench as he will receive from me. As I have already said to the House, a ceasefire is simply impractical, because we have to have two sides that are willing to sign up to a ceasefire and there is absolutely no suggestion, at any point, that either of them will.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): A Minister in the Iranian Government, General Ezzatollah Zarghami, formerly of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has told Iranian media that this “first mission” as the “production manager” of Iranian-made rockets is to supply those rockets to be fired into Israel and hit civilians. He openly told Iranian media that he lived in Hamas terror tunnels “for some time”. That is an Iranian Minister openly admitting to having lived in terrorist tunnels and supplying rockets. Does my right hon. Friend share my concern about Iran bankrolling and arming Hamas?

Mr Mitchell: Yes, I share that concern very much, as do the Government.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On illegal settlements, does not the experience of the past two decades show that words have absolutely no impact on Prime Minister Netanyahu? I welcome the Minister's announcement today that the Government are examining sanctioning the violent illegal settlers, following in America's footsteps, but why can we not have a ban on all trade between the United Kingdom and the illegal settlements?

Mr Mitchell: The Government have always made it absolutely clear that the settlements are illegal under international law, and we will continue to make that case as forcefully as we think appropriate.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I agree with the deputy Secretary of State's comments on degrading Hamas, but does he agree that the malevolent force in the region is Iran? Although, obviously, we do not want

a direct conflict with Iran, what more can the Government do, with our partners and allies, to ensure that we can degrade the capacity and capabilities of Iran to inflict the suffering that it has inflicted on the region?

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. Friend will know that the Government have been clear that measures need to be taken, and we have used our own military assets in this respect, to make sure that the conflict does not widen. We have sent a very clear warning to Iran in that respect, along with our allies, and he may rest assured that we continue to watch this issue with extreme care.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): In response to an earlier question, the Minister talked of dangerous regional escalation and the scale of the loss of life. How do his Government hope to prevent either, and support a just and lasting peace, without calling for a ceasefire? How can they claim to support a two-state solution when they do not recognise the state of Palestine? One plus zero has never equalled two.

Mr Mitchell: It is, I think, the policy of both sides of the House that we should not pursue the possibility of a ceasefire, because there is no possibility, for very trenchant reasons that have been set out. The hon. Lady is, however, right to point to the political horizon, to ensure that we take advantage, as soon as the moment is plausible, of building a political track. As part of that, we are looking to build Palestinian state capacity. We know that Gaza should be under Palestinian control when this is over. Hamas has no place in a future of Gaza and we must never allow them ever to be able to entrench themselves in the civilian population again.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. What recent engagement has my right hon. Friend had with Qatari counterparts in relation to their pivotal role as mediator between Israel and Hamas?

Mr Mitchell: Discussions with Qatari go on all the time. Indeed, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the Foreign Office Minister with responsibility for the middle east, has been in Qatar recently.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will have seen pictures of the horrific loss of life in Gaza, which started up again over the weekend, and of half-naked men being paraded through the streets. The Geneva convention prohibits turning prisoners of war into objects of “public curiosity”. He will also know of the grave concerns about reports of the use of rape by Hamas fighters on 7 October. All of this shows that we will need a very clear mechanism for the investigation of allegations of war crimes and for accountability, if war crimes are found to have happened. Will the Minister set out what the UK Government, who have said that international law must be upheld, believe that mechanism should be?

Mr Mitchell: I have a great deal of sympathy with the points that the hon. Lady makes. The British Government have made it clear that all parties in this terrible conflict must abide by international humanitarian law. We continue to identify and look for mechanisms for ensuring that

[Mr Mitchell]

there can be no impunity in that respect, and that there will be transparency over the actions that the forces take.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is good to see you back in the Chair, Mr Speaker. The humanitarian pauses gave an opportunity for the welcome release of Israeli hostages. However, as a result of Palestinian prisoners being released, there is a concern that Hamas are gaining ground in the west bank and could end up being the major force in the whole of the area that we call Palestine. What efforts is my right hon. Friend making to ensure the release of the hostages without any conditions?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the terrible plight of the hostages. I cannot give the House a running commentary on what is happening in respect of the hostages, but there have been no new developments. He will know that the Ministry of Defence is supplying surveillance flights over Gaza to assist in that general endeavour, but he may rest assured that the plight of the hostages is at the top of our list of concerns.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Israeli Defence Ministry has told the UN that it “must do better” at delivering aid to Gaza. This is not a natural disaster; it is deliberate military action, during which Israeli forces have so far killed 130 UN aid staff, mostly alongside their families. How many more innocent people must die before Members on both Front Benches realise the scale of the atrocities and demand a permanent ceasefire as the only way out?

Mr Mitchell: I understand the right hon. Lady’s strength of feeling, but she does no service to Members on either Front Bench, who have made it clear that the reasons why a ceasefire would not work are known to the House and that trying to secure humanitarian pauses—the longer the better—is the way to release humanitarian support to those who are suffering in the way she describes.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The despicable actions of Hamas and Iran are responsible for this conflict, but proportionality is important in the rules of war, as my right hon. Friend knows. Can he explain what we are doing, working with our friends in the middle east, to encourage a sense of proportionality in Israel’s response, so that we minimise the many civilian casualties while respecting their need to take military action?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend expresses the balance very clearly and very well, particularly in the first part of his question. The important point, which Britain makes continually to Israel, is that its response must be proportionate, and it must operate within international humanitarian law.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): We urgently need to see steps towards a permanent ceasefire and an end to hostility on all sides, but the Minister is right that neither Israel nor Hamas have agreed to that. In seeking the release of hostages, and knowing that we need to see an end to Hamas’s influence and place in Gaza, there ultimately needs to be an

alternative to Israel’s current strategy, with hospitals now at breaking point, food and medicine not getting through, and effectively the de-development of Gaza. What are the Government doing to push for a consensus at the UN, and for a strategy to ensure that the International Criminal Court will be able to hold all parties to account for their conduct?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the critical need to get support into Gaza. Yesterday, 100 trucks got through, and 300,000 litres of fuel got through during 9 and 10 December. It is nothing like enough, but we are doing everything that we can in respect of the humanitarian effort, alongside our likeminded partners, to galvanise the international humanitarian community to get aid into Gaza. It is not an issue of getting aid into the region; the aid is there, and there is plenty more back-up to come. It is about actually getting it into Gaza. We are stretching every sinew to try to achieve an increase in humanitarian support as fast as we can.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Few would deny Israel’s right to defend itself against an internationally proscribed terrorist organisation, but as a military man, I do not always find it easy to reconcile that with what we are seeing on the ground in Gaza, or the broader operational nature of that campaign. Could the Minister please assure me of the efforts being conducted behind closed doors to ensure Israeli restraint?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is right to underline the concern about the humanitarian casualties, but as I have said repeatedly in response to this urgent question, we are doing everything we can to make the point that he has emphasised.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Hamas are an obstacle to peace and a two-state solution, and they must release all hostages now. While pushing for that as a means to further pauses in hostilities, can the Minister confirm what discussions are taking place with international partners to create the conditions where Israel is secure and Palestinians can see a path to reconstruction, renewal and statehood in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: I reassure the hon. Lady that those discussions are indeed taking place. The Foreign Secretary was in Washington DC last week, and he had discussions with his counterpart. The Prime Minister had a lengthy conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu on 5 December, and at COP the Prime Minister met Israel, Qatar, Egypt and Jordan. He emphasised throughout the importance of providing a political horizon. The hon. Lady is right to identify the set of actions that are required, but she may rest assured that the Government are doing everything we can to pursue them.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I was profoundly disappointed by the Minister’s comments when he dismissed calls for a humanitarian ceasefire as being implausible. If it is so implausible, can he explain why that is the position of every other country in the world with the exception of the United States of America, and does he not understand that it is damaging this country’s credibility to be an honest broker in the necessary international discussions that have to follow?

Can he name one action by his Department that has been designed to try to gain the trust of the Palestinian people in this conflict?

Mr Mitchell: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, I am in no doubt that Lord Cameron's visit to the west bank will have done just that. On his first point, perhaps he should ask those who are advocating for a ceasefire the question that I have sought to answer: how can there be a ceasefire when neither party to the military action would be willing to accept one?

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): Since the terrible attack by Hamas on 7 October, more than 250 Palestinians have been killed by illegal settlers in the west bank and there are unconfirmed reports of the involvement of the Israel Defence Forces in the violence. The criteria outlining who can receive arms export licences from the Government include strong wording on violence against women and children. What diplomatic engagement has the Minister had to ensure that any arms exported from this country are not used to facilitate unlawful military activity?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to make it clear that the targeted killing of civilians is completely unacceptable. That is why I said in response to the shadow Foreign Secretary that we seek not just the arrest but the prosecution and punishment of those responsible. In respect of arms licences, she may well know that Britain has the most demanding export licence regime of any country in the world. I think that can give us all confidence that those export licences are granted on the right terms.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Is it not very obvious that Israel is herding the entire population of Gaza, in a state of utter desperation and poverty, with a lack of food, medicine and water, and with serious injuries that cannot be treated, and that its ultimate aim is to expel the population of Gaza and to reoccupy it? Does the Minister not think it is time that we supported the call for a ceasefire, as every other nation in the world has done, and stopped being isolated in this ridiculous approach of saying that somehow a ceasefire cannot work? We have to start somewhere to save life. We have to start somewhere to prevent this catastrophe from getting even worse, on top of the 18,000 already killed in Gaza.

Mr Mitchell: I have set out what we are trying to do to relieve the suffering the right hon. Gentleman so eloquently describes in Gaza, but I have to caution him that a simple call for a ceasefire is not the answer. Much better, in the view of the Government, is to make it clear that humanitarian pauses—preferably extended humanitarian pauses—offer hope of the sort of relief that he and I both wish to see.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): When this terrible conflict comes to an end, as all wars must, both Gaza and the west bank will require substantial investment to restore and enhance the economic wellbeing of the Palestinian people. What discussions is my right hon. Friend having with other countries about how they may take a role in an economic revival of the area, which could play a role in a lasting peace?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to emphasise that the economic reconstruction and rebuilding of Gaza will be an essential element in any political settlement. More widely, as I have set out, the Government are trying to make sure that, when there is an opportunity to drive forward that political horizon, that is precisely what we will do.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I have just met with Othman, a constituent from Halifax, who is originally from Gaza and is utterly distressed about what his family back home are enduring. The UN Secretary-General has declared that

“nowhere in Gaza is safe”

for civilians. We know that the aid getting in is utterly insufficient and the humanitarian situation cannot be addressed until the violence ends. I have heard what the Minister has to say, but the humanitarian pauses that have been secured might have felt impossible at the start of this conflict. We urge him to redouble his efforts to work towards an enduring humanitarian ceasefire, which surely is the next logical step.

Mr Mitchell: I agree very much with the hon. Lady about the importance of securing a humanitarian pause. That is exactly what we are doing; she will be pleased, like me, to hear that the United Kingdom permanent representative at the United Nations is on a visit to the region at this time to see, among other things, how we can achieve precisely that.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Minister talks up the UK's arms export licences, but Amnesty International has identified a particular loophole in those licences: the 2002 incorporation guidelines allow UK components to be sent to third destinations for onward export to Israel. Can he give me any assurances that, unlike in 2009 and 2014, that is not happening right now?

Mr Mitchell: I have set out the fact that Britain has the toughest export licences and regulations anywhere in the world. Of course, if the hon. Lady has any evidence of those licences being infringed in some way, she should bring it to the attention of the authorities.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that, as far back as 10 October, the independent UN commission of inquiry said:

“There is already clear evidence that war crimes may have been committed in the latest explosion of violence in Israel and Gaza, and all those who have violated international law and targeted civilians must be held accountable for their crimes.”

As of Saturday, the death toll is more than 17,000 people, of whom nearly 13,000 are women and children, and thousands more are believed to be buried under the rubble. Every passing day is another day of children dying. Like so many of my Vauxhall constituents who email me, it is hard not to feel powerless when we watch the scale of death and destruction day after day. Does the Minister agree that the International Criminal Court should be the jurisdiction that addresses the conduct of all parties in adhering to international law?

Mr Mitchell: The Government have made clear what the role and remit of the International Criminal Court is. As the hon. Lady will be aware, the British Government are a strong supporter of the International Criminal Court.

[Mr Mitchell]

The situation that she described only emphasises the requirement—the demand—that we achieve another humanitarian pause and are able to get deeply needed humanitarian supplies into Gaza.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): With hundreds of thousands of Palestinians now homeless and parts of northern Gaza rendered effectively uninhabitable, there is understandably real concern that many people will not be able to return to their homes. Can the Minister tell us what representations he has made to make it absolutely clear that permanent forced displacement of the Gazan population is unacceptable, not just across international borders and into the west bank, but within Gaza itself?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady will know that, in order to help those people, the possibility of providing safe areas in which support can be given is being actively looked at by the United Nations. The problem with safe areas is that they have to be absolutely safe, and we must have the understanding that both Hamas and Israel, and every other entity, will guarantee safety when people are brought there to receive support. That is an ongoing discussion, but it is an area of considerable concern to the United Nations and other humanitarians, which are seeking to operate in this space.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): The Labour party continues to call for a cessation of hostilities in Gaza to give us the time and space to alleviate the immense suffering of Palestinian civilians by getting the required food, water, medicines and other aid into blockaded Gaza, and to facilitate the release of all remaining hostages. Does the Minister agree that the international community can and must use the next cessation of hostilities to make political progress towards what we all want: an end to the conflict and a permanent ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is not, I think, straying from the policy that has been set out by his Front Benchers. We all want to see those pauses develop so that urgently needed humanitarian aid can get into Gaza, so in that respect, I think that he and the Government are in agreement.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I have heard the Minister's explanation of why the UK made the deeply disappointing decision not to support the UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire. Over the weekend, he may have heard the comments of Tom Fletcher—a former ambassador and No. 10 adviser—who said that when the UK supported such a resolution in 2009, it helped to move the US away from a veto and towards abstention, ultimately securing a ceasefire. Is the Minister at risk of letting the best be the enemy of the good, when we should be grabbing every possible opportunity to end the bloodshed and the suffering that we see in Gaza?

Mr Mitchell: The Government are doing everything we possibly can. I have set out clearly the difficulties of achieving a ceasefire when neither of the prime parties to it is willing to accept it. I hope that the hon. Lady will reflect on that.

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The UK's abstention on the UN Security Council resolution on Friday was shocking and wholly wrong. It has been reported today that Egypt has invoked resolution 377 to circumvent the US veto on the Security Council, acting to maintain peace. Two million Gazans are displaced and facing disease and starvation, and 18,000 people have been killed, 70% of whom were women and children. Will the UK now back a ceasefire—I implore you, Minister—at an emergency session of the UN General Assembly? That is the only way peace will be achieved.

Mr Speaker: We have quite a few people standing. I am going to finish at 4.30 pm, and I do not want Members to miss out.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes an eloquent call for a ceasefire, but she needs to address the points that have been made elsewhere in the House about why a ceasefire cannot be achieved. I hope she will feel that the Government are doing the right thing in trying to secure humanitarian pauses and increase the flow of humanitarian supplies through Rafah and other entries into Gaza.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Does the Minister share my upset and deep concern that the UN Security Council was unable to find the wording for a resolution to end fighting in Palestine that all its members could agree on and to make political progress towards the permanent ceasefire we all desperately want? If he does agree that a newly worded UN resolution is needed, what role will the UK Government play?

Mr Mitchell: I pay tribute to the British team at the United Nations under its leader, Barbara Woodward. That team has an extraordinary effect, punching above Britain's weight in trying to corral people to agreement, but I hope the hon. Lady will understand that in the circumstances of last week, it was not possible for Britain to agree to a resolution. In many respects, it was a very good resolution, but as I pointed out, if there was not the will to condemn Hamas for the appalling atrocities committed on 7 October, we simply did not feel we could support it.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I have to tell the Minister that a humanitarian pause is merely a delay: innocent children are being bombed, and a humanitarian pause does not stop that. However, can he tell us what consideration is being given to the huge number of Gazans injured in the IDF's indiscriminate attacks, for whom proper treatment is utterly impossible? Constituents who are NHS clinicians have got in touch with me, looking to offer their assistance in the region just as soon as it is practical and safe to do so. Have any discussions taken place about facilitating such offers?

Mr Mitchell: If, as I think the hon. Gentleman is saying, those are offers to provide hospital and medical support, we—along with others—are actively looking at what support we can give to those who are injured in Gaza and may come out of Gaza.

Michael Shanks (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab): The Minister said earlier that international humanitarian law must always be upheld with no impunity,

but what does that mean in practice? What mechanisms is he proposing we use, and what specific conversations has his Department had with the International Criminal Court to investigate potential breaches of humanitarian law? Has it withdrawn from the position of the former Prime Minister that Israel is outside the jurisdiction of the ICC?

Mr Mitchell: I must make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that the Government's position on the International Criminal Court has been well set out—not least that it is not for Ministers to make those judgments, but for judges, the prosecutor and the court itself. I am afraid that I cannot help him on that point, but on the importance of abiding by international humanitarian law, of there being no impunity and of there being retrospective judgment on that, the hon. Gentleman will know that the British Government have been one of the foremost Governments around the world in insisting that impunity should never exist.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Does the Minister agree with Labour that Israel must not besiege or blockade Gaza, must comply with international law, must protect innocent lives and must not replicate the devastating aerial bombing tactics that have been used in northern Gaza and, according to Israeli reports, have resulted in 61% of deaths being civilians?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady asks whether the Government agree with Labour on these matters. As she knows, there is agreement on many of these things across the two Front Benches, in particular that calling for a ceasefire is not the right thing to do.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Ind): Israeli Defence Minister Gallant has been reported as saying that,

“Gaza won't return to what it was before. We will eliminate everything”,
and that,

“We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly.”

He is not the only Israeli political leader to make such dehumanising statements. All the while, war crimes are inhumanely being committed by Israeli forces, who have killed close to 20,000 Palestinian people. Does the Minister believe that such statements indicate genocidal intent, and what concrete steps is he taking to sanction those responsible?

Mr Mitchell: What I can say is that, in Gaza, there will in the future be no place for a Hamas Administration.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The IDF promised us precision and intelligence, but what the world is witnessing is the wholesale destruction of a society and a people. What must change for the UK Government to vote tomorrow for a UN Security Council motion for a cessation of hostilities that will ultimately lead to a ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: The two points I have mentioned about the UN are that there were plenty of good lines in the UN Security Council resolution on which we abstained, but that we will not support a resolution that does not condemn Hamas for the appalling events that took place on 7 October.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome the shift in the UK Government position to abstention at the United Nations last week, a different position from that taken by the United States. Qatar says that the former willingness to discuss pauses is not in place at the moment, and the Minister has rightly said that events in Gaza cannot be allowed to carry on. What does he think it will take to re-establish the willingness to discuss pauses as a first step, hopefully, towards the permanent ending of the conflict?

Mr Mitchell: The right hon. Member is right to focus on securing these pauses, because there is precedent and the hope that we can achieve that. What is most important is that everyone should press for these pauses for as long as possible—previously, we were asking for five-day pauses as a minimum—so that the humanitarian supplies and support can get into Gaza.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): To clarify something the Minister said about the United Nations resolution, if it had rightly condemned Hamas, would the UK Government have voted for it so that we can all see an end to the killing?

Mr Mitchell: Unfortunately, it was not possible to achieve that compromise when it came to negotiating the UN resolution, but the hon. Member may rest assured that in all these matters Britain is a force for good at the UN in trying to achieve the end aim that everyone in this House agrees is required.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Could the Minister clarify whether the UK Government failed to support the UN Security Council resolution because it did not mention Hamas or because they oppose a ceasefire in any event, or both? If the Government have doubts about Israel's adherence to international humanitarian law, should they not call for a ceasefire observed by all sides until they are persuaded that Palestinian civilians are not subject to collective punishment?

Mr Mitchell: It is the plausibility of a ceasefire that informed our decisions on that matter, but on the hon. Member's specific question, we were unable to support the resolution because it did not make an absolute condemnation of what Hamas did on 7 October.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Does the Minister now accept that if Israel's intention is to raze Gaza to the ground, which it seems as though it is, that cannot possibly help move the situation towards a long-term two-state solution, or does he suspect there may be some in the Israeli Government who have no intention of wanting to achieve that solution?

Mr Mitchell: I do not believe it is Israel's intention to raze Gaza to the ground. Israel's intention is to ensure that Hamas terrorists can never inflict on the state of Israel the appalling events that took place on 7 October.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the UN Security Council was unable, regrettably, to achieve a ceasefire because of the decisions of the US and UK Governments, what discussions have taken place about creating a ceasefire in the south of Gaza, to

[*Rachael Maskell*]

which many Palestinians in Gaza have been sent for their security and safety, and would the Minister advocate such a position?

Mr Mitchell: For reasons the hon. Member will understand, there was no discussion about a ceasefire within the Government—I have very clearly set out the reasons—but on southern Gaza, we are exploring every possible mechanism to bring the relief of humanitarian supplies, including the extremely difficult but plausible advent of safe zones.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is possible to condemn both the brutal rapes and murders carried out by Hamas and Israel's indiscriminate and illegal killing of women and children, and we now have 800 scholars of genocide stating that this continued bombardment of Gaza is at grave risk of being genocide. With that in mind, at what point will the Government consider supporting a permanent ceasefire?

Mr Mitchell: As I have repeatedly set out to the House, the reasons why the Government, and indeed the Opposition Front Bench, are unable to call for a ceasefire are very clear.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): At the end of last week the US vetoed a Security Council resolution brought about by the UN Secretary-General triggering article 99. What are the Government doing to encourage our friends in Washington to support, or at least abstain on, a resolution that does refer to Hamas and that is acceptable to other permanent members of the Security Council?

Mr Mitchell: The team in our mission at the UN in New York works night and day to try and get progress on the terrible events taking place in the middle east and it will be encouraged by the hon. Gentleman's words that more can and should be done.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): United Nations Secretary-Generals initiate article 99 very rarely; I understand this is only the seventh time that this has happened, and it is only initiated when the Secretary-General believes an event threatens the maintenance of international peace and security. As the UK abstained on the resolution and 13 members supported it, with the US against, the UK are in an isolated position; does this mean the UK Government disagree fundamentally with the position of the UN Secretary-General?

Mr Mitchell: The UN Secretary-General and the British Government work extremely closely together; it is an extraordinarily important and close relationship for both parties. But I have set out very clearly why it has not been possible for Britain to support a ceasefire, and above all it is because of the impracticality of calling for it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his clear answers and clear understanding of the conflict. The destruction and dismantling of the Hamas terrorist group must be achieved and concluded before any permanent peace can be found. Stories in the press today told of those who came so close to being released; the return of hostages is an urgent matter for the families, who have waited over a month imagining the horrors being faced by their loved ones. What progress is being made to see at least the women and children returned, and can our Government and our Minister say whether anything further can be done to help to see this war ending and people returning to a semblance of normal life?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend speaks for many in the House with his compassion and determination to improve what is a dreadful position, as has been so clearly set out throughout this urgent question, and the whole House will join him in hoping we can make progress in the coming days and weeks.

Former Afghan Special Forces: Deportation

4.23 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on former Afghan special forces facing deportation from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

The Minister for Armed Forces (James Heapey): I thank the shadow Minister for asking this urgent question.

The Afghan relocations and assistance policy is far more generous in design than predecessor schemes such as the ex-gratia scheme. None the less, ARAP is a specific scheme intended to support those who worked for, with or alongside the UK armed forces in support of the UK mission or national security objectives in Afghanistan. While we are acutely aware of the difficult circumstances in which many Afghans find themselves, not everyone will be eligible even if they worked for the Afghanistan security forces. Many Afghans have worked in proximity to UK armed forces but this may have been in service of the Afghan Government, in a nation-building capacity, or though working directly with other nations.

CF333 and ATF444, known as the Triples, were Afghan-led taskforces set up to counter drug trafficking and organised crime and they reported into the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs. They are therefore a component of the Afghan national security forces and are not automatically in scope for relocation under ARAP. Regrettably, we cannot relocate all former members of the Afghan national security forces under the ARAP scheme. That means that some Afghans, whose bravery and heroism are in no doubt whatever—indeed, I served alongside many of them myself—such as certain members of the CF333 and ATF444 taskforces, will not be eligible for relocation under ARAP. Each ARAP application is assessed on a case-by-case basis. All applications, including those from former members of the Triples, are scrutinised on their own merits and in line with our published policy and eligibility criteria, available on the Government website, and in line with the immigration rules. All applicants, irrespective of job role, will be eligible only if they individually meet these criteria outlined in the published policy.

I must emphasise this point for the record: any suggestion that we are making blanket decisions—eligible or ineligible—for any cohort of applicant, or that we have any preconceived position on any application to the scheme, is simply untrue. That is not the approach that Defence takes on processing applications as a matter of policy. The MOD consults the evidence provided from each applicant and our own internal records and engages with internal stakeholders and other Departments when determining eligibility in line with the Afghan relocations and assistance policy and the immigration rules.

Luke Pollard: Since before the fall of Kabul, the Government's treatment of Afghans who worked alongside British troops has been a shameful saga of failure. Ministers have failed to deal with the ballooning backlog of ARAP applications, broken housing promises, data breaches and Afghans stuck abroad in limbo fearing for their lives. Today, we have learned from reports that

former Afghan special forces who served alongside British troops are possibly facing deportation back to Afghanistan. Let us be clear: that means that lives could be put at serious harm from the Taliban.

All of us in this House want to see the Government finally and fully honour the commitments given by Britain as a nation to these Afghans. That is why we are all here today. Urgent detail is now needed from the Minister about this escalating situation. First, how many former Afghan special forces who served alongside our forces are at risk of imminent deportation from Afghanistan to Pakistan? What assessment has been made by the Ministry of Defence of the threat to these Afghan elite forces if they are deported back to Afghanistan? What assessment has been made of the threat to their families, and is it as grim as we all fear?

What is the current backlog in ARAP cases? In a parliamentary question answered last week about the safety of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the Government said that they had

“received assurances from the Government of Pakistan that Afghans being supported...under the Afghans Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) will remain safe in Pakistan while they await relocation to the UK.”

In light of today's news, what were the original assurances given to the UK by the Pakistani Government? Can the Minister confirm that zero Afghans pending ARAP or ACRS application decisions or relocations will be sent back to Afghanistan?

General Sir Richard Barrons, who served with the British Army for 12 years in Afghanistan, described the failure to relocate these former Afghan special forces to the UK as a “disgrace” and a “betrayal”. He is right, is he not? There can be no more excuses. Ministers must fix their ailing Afghan schemes and honour the commitment given to our Afghan friends before they are deported back to Afghanistan and potentially killed by the Taliban.

James Heapey: I am not sure where to start on that. What the hon. Gentleman I think is knowingly doing is conflating a number of separate issues. There is the issue over the processing of those who can legitimately come to the UK under the ARAP scheme. Finding those applicants in among tens of thousands of applications—many of which are duplicates and many of which are bogus, though plenty are not—has been a heck of a task for the team within the MOD that have been tasked with that over the past two years. However, we are getting to the bottom of the pile.

Crucially, those who are eligible under category 2, which is those who worked directly for the British armed forces, whether as patrol interpreters or cultural advisers and so on, are known to us. We have the employment records, so, as I have said to the House many times, we have been able to go into the list of applications, find those whom we are looking for and whom we know to have worked for us and accelerate their approval. As we get through the tail end of the applications, we are seeing lots of rejections, because frankly we have already gone ahead and found those who matched the employment records that we had from our time in Afghanistan. On those who are eligible for the core of the scheme, I have a great deal of confidence that we really are reaching the bottom of the list, and

[James Heapey]

we are moving at pace to bring them out. I will first answer the hon. Gentleman's question about the deportation of those who are eligible.

I spoke to both the UK high commissioner to Islamabad and the Pakistan high commissioner to London this afternoon before coming to the House. Both are entirely comfortable with the assurances we have received from the Pakistan Government that those for whom we have made an eligibility decision will not be deported. I know of one case where somebody who had received a rejection was deported before their appeal was heard. I am not sure that there is necessarily anything we can do to mitigate that—Pakistan is, after all, a sovereign country and has every right to say who can and cannot be in the country—but that person, whose review was successful, was successfully brought back into Pakistan and is now waiting to come to the UK.

As for those in Islamabad, wider Pakistan or any other third country and who may have worked for the Afghan special forces, the answer is that we cannot possibly know that, because we do not have the employment records of the Afghan special forces. Therefore, we cannot say who did and did not work with them. We know who has applied to ARAP, and every time someone does, we make an individual judgment about what that person did. Were they just a member of the Triples—heroic and important, but not necessarily working directly for and with us—or were they a member of the Triples who routinely worked with UK special forces or the intelligence community, who would thus be eligible under ARAP category 4? I appreciate that that is a suboptimal answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, but if we do not know who worked for the Afghan special forces because they work for the Afghan Ministry of Interior Affairs or the Afghan Ministry of Defence, it is impossible to say how many of those people may or may not now be in Pakistan.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I think I am right in saying that the International Security Assistance Force was officially a NATO assistance force to the then Afghan Government, so what is there to prevent NATO countries from banding together and making joint representations to the Pakistani Government that whatever they do with former service personnel who, at our request, fought against the Taliban, they should not now mercilessly deport them to the tender non-mercies of the Taliban, who are currently out for vengeance?

James Heapey: I understand my right hon. Friend's question. He is a great champion of this cohort. NATO countries—and, indeed, countries beyond NATO, like Australia—routinely make representations to the Pakistani Government, who have been incredibly flexible and supportive in working for us. The challenge—it is sad to have to say this—is that there are many people who claim to have served in the Triples who may well not have done. If my right hon. Friend were to go through the casework files on our system, he would see the same pictures submitted again and again as evidence by people claiming to have worked in the Triples. Absent those employment records from the Afghan MOIA or the Afghan MOD, it is incredibly hard to say who is and who is not legitimate, given that often people are accessing on social media stock photographs that they seek to use

as evidence. I have every confidence that the Pakistan Government are being incredibly flexible and supportive, but it is very difficult to ask them to allow everybody who claims to have served in a unit to stay when that is incredibly hard to verify, other than when people in the UK MOD, the US DOD, the Australian Department of Defence or wherever else can personally vouch for the relationship they had with that operator.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am sure the Minister will recognise that it is not only Members of the House, but some of his ex-comrades in arms—even people like my own brother, who served two tours of duty in Afghanistan—who are deeply concerned about the idea of their former comrades in arms being forced back into the hands of the Taliban. To them, it seems to reflect a reality: there is a lack of clarity about why some people are not getting access to schemes to access the UK, especially those who fled without paperwork—because, as I am sure we can imagine, the Taliban will not be giving ex-special forces any passports anytime soon.

I wonder whether the Minister answer two specific points. Does he recognise the reality that ex-special forces from Afghanistan would face if they were given back into the hands of the Taliban? Does he agree that while Pakistan may have the right to do so, it has not always been the best arbiter of relationships with the new regime in Afghanistan and has sometimes gone out of its way to undermine a collective approach to them?

James Heapey: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, I am reluctant to join him in making that criticism, because, in my experience of dealing with the Pakistan Government—of whom I have asked an awful lot, as did the Chief of the General Staff when he recently visited and was hosted by the Pakistan chief of the army staff—they have been incredibly accommodating; they have arguably been more accommodating to the UK's requests than those of other allies and partners.

On the hon. Gentleman's first question—a deeply uncomfortable one—I do indeed recognise the danger. I recognise the danger faced by the *kandak* that I served alongside in the upper Helmand valley. I recognise the danger that exists for every other Afghan army and air force unit, which were undoubtedly closely related to ISAF forces throughout the campaign. But, for them, none of the resettlement schemes from any of the ISAF countries or their partners allows them to come, because they are not set up for those who served in the wider Afghan forces. As a veteran of that conflict—someone who lived cheek by jowl with a *kandak*—I can tell him that it makes me sick, but that is the reality. To make them all eligible would be to give eligibility to hundreds of thousands of servicepeople, and five times that again to bring their dependants. That is simply not an endeavour that the UK can undertake.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know from working with the Minister on Operation Pitting the passion that he brings to this work and the deep debt of gratitude he personally owes to those who fought alongside him. He will appreciate the House's concern that we could see someone who fought alongside our forces forced from Pakistan back to Afghanistan. I take on board his point that the entirety of the special forces worked with the whole mission, and not just with the UK, so what discussions is he having with our allies about perhaps

having a quota for moving people over? That is a clumsy way of putting it, but it is the best way I can summarise it. What work is he doing with Home Office resources to ensure that there is no backlog in ARAP places, and what is he doing with colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that housing is available for those who need to be relocated from Pakistan?

James Heapey: My hon. Friend is right to ask whether it is possible for countries that have relocation schemes to club together to share the burden of any particular grouping. The difficulty is that, without the employment records, there is no way of knowing the entirety of those who served in that grouping. Thus, as I said previously, members of the Triples or other units—the National Directorate of Security, for example—tend to be granted category 4 because there is a member of the UK armed forces or UK intelligence community, or veterans, who can personally vouch for the role they played in the conflict. That will be the same for the Australians, the Canadians, the Americans, the Danes and whoever else. It would be impossible to say that an entire taskforce—CF333 or ATF444—could all come without knowing the totality of the employment record, because there would be simply no way to determine who did or did not serve with those units.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I have a constituent who was a member of the special forces in Afghanistan—I will not name him—and who approached me several months ago about his family stuck in Pakistan. The bureaucracy and disconnection between different parts of Government are astounding. Finally, we have relocated his family to the UK, but it was not an easy process. It took a long time for me to wade through the treacle of the various Government Departments. Who is in charge of that? We have just spent £200 million on the Rwanda resettlement scheme. Surely, putting some money and effort behind the scheme would solve the problem.

James Heapey: A number of policy decisions and realities around wider immigration in this country have meant that ARAP has moved at a variable pace. Ultimately, ARAP sits under the MOD and, thus, me. ACRS sits elsewhere. Since the Pakistanis made it clear that they would start to deport those without documents, we have been able to accelerate movement both from Afghanistan to Pakistan and from Pakistan to the UK. I regret that it comes on the back of a number of months of relatively little movement, but we are now moving with an urgency that I feel much more comfortable standing in the House and talking about.

Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I have just come off the phone to a friend who lived in the mountains and worked with the 333. He explained how the Foreign Office paid them through the Ministry of Interior Affairs, but he and his colleagues gave them cash to top up their payments—effectively to pay them special forces pay. He said that the MOD position is

“the most ludicrous argument I have heard in my life. If it was not so sad, it would be hilarious.”

The 444 worked with every single brigade in Helmand and was described as an indispensable part of Task Force Helmand, doing outreach and reconnaissance. Do the Government not need to take a slightly harder look at this?

James Heapey: The Government are looking at it very hard indeed. We consider every case on its individual merits. If an individual served in one of those taskforces or in the National Directorate of Security and is not entitled to come, but there is evidence that they worked closely with UK intelligence community, UK special forces or our embassy, we are making the case for them to come under category 4. As I could have said in response to many questions, where a colleague feels that they have the evidence needed to show direct connection between the individual and the UK, rather than simply their service within a unit, we will consider that evidence on the individual basis that we set out.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I was in Afghanistan at the very beginning with the Triples. It is particularly painful that, despite commitments and assurances from the UK Government, this cohort of Afghans and their families are left fearing for their lives. I listened carefully to what the Minister had to say, but I have seen credible evidence of an individual who served with the Triples and who was rejected for the ARAP scheme by the MOD. He was subsequently arrested by the Taliban, beaten and killed. Does the Minister know of any Triples who have died under similar circumstances? If he does, what more can be done to prevent the loss of life of the heroes we served alongside?

James Heapey: The House may think that I am speaking relatively plainly in response to these questions. Undoubtedly, a significant number of people who served in the Afghan national security forces, like the person the hon. Gentleman referred to, are in mortal danger as a consequence of having served in the Afghan army, air force or special forces. It is also a reality that no country has set up a relocation scheme that extends beyond those who worked directly for that country and that verifies the service of those people, unless directly alongside the UK special forces or UK intelligence communities. That is extraordinarily hard. I would like to sit down with the hon. Gentleman, who is a great champion of this cause, to talk through the case that he knows of. There is no point pretending that there are not many others. But there is also the reality of how hard it is to verify the service of those who just served in the unit rather than explicitly alongside UK personnel.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Given the contrast between the rhetoric and promises of resettlement, and the shambolic reality facing many Afghans who worked for us, with us or fought alongside our troops, as detailed by many Members across the House, what assessment has the Minister made of the likely impact of his apparent bad faith on the willingness of foreign nationals to offer us their assistance in future?

James Heapey: I push back on the idea that this is all some sort of failure. The reality is that we have moved out very nearly 14,000 people. We have continued to do so against incredible difficulties in Afghanistan and while needing to work very carefully alongside the Pakistan Government to meet their requirements, so I do not accept that initial characterisation. As for the hon. Lady's wider question about what impact the scheme may have on our ability to work with partner forces and locally employed civilians in future, I would turn the question round the other way. My grave concern is that, while I think we are doing the right thing by

[James Heapey]

those we served with and alongside in Afghanistan because of the circumstances of our departure from Afghanistan, if we set the precedent where every time our military works anywhere in the world those who work for us or alongside us in a partner force have an expectation of immigration rights in the UK, that will make it incredibly difficult to operate. That was not the question she asked, but I think the counterfactual is equally worth considering.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Earlier this year, the Minister said that the backlog for ARAP would be cleared by August, and earlier he said that he was getting to the bottom of the pile. Exactly how many applications are still outstanding?

James Heapey: I apologise to the House, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I said that we would do it by August and we have not. I own my words and thank the right hon. Lady for pointing out that I have not achieved that. My knowledge is that there are less than a few hundred eligible applications that we need to find. There are around 2,000 people in Afghanistan who we need to move out and around 1,800 left in Pakistan who we need to bring in. In all, I would expect another 4,000 to 4,500 arrivals. We are aiming to that get done as quickly as possible, because the Pakistan Government are keen that we do so without delay. We are working with them to achieve that.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for explaining what engagement he has had with representatives of Pakistan's Government in Islamabad. Does the assurance he received from Islamabad in relation to personnel who will not now be deported to Afghanistan extend to their families?

James Heapey: Yes, absolutely. For those who are in Pakistan with an acceptance or eligibility, we have been working with the Pakistan authorities through our high commission in Islamabad to make sure that the Afghan principal and their family are protected from the work the Pakistan immigration service has under way. If the hon. Gentleman, or indeed other Members shaking their heads knowingly know otherwise, I would be grateful for the names of the people they are concerned about and I will make sure that is discussed with the Pakistan high commission without delay.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said that he was processing the people who have been accepted for ARAP to come to the UK from Pakistan at a pace. Since the hotels they were staying in were closed down, including in my constituency, how many who are eligible and have been given the paperwork have actually come to the UK? Secondly, where somebody believes they have been wrongly denied ARAP, will he undertake to look at cases where there is very clear evidence that a decision may have been made wrongly?

James Heapey: In the last couple of weeks, I think—off the top of my head—about seven flights, so about 1,700 people, have come to the UK. In December, we will move significantly more than in any month since August 2021, when Operation Pitting happened. Those moves are a

combination of ARAP and ACRS. The reason we are able to move them at such pace is that we have mobilised quite a significant amount of the MOD training estate to act as transitional accommodation. We are trying to move people through as quickly as possible into service family accommodation which we have made available. We are hugely grateful to local authorities all over the country for how closely they are working with us to deliver that.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): While no one doubts that this is a complex situation, the cases that we are bringing up reflect how it has been managed, and I think that that is what presents the challenge. I have two separate constituents who were under the direct supervision of UK forces; indeed, the UK paid for them to be trained, so there should be a record in the UK that they were working for the Afghan forces. The Minister said himself that he felt sick about people who would have worked alongside colleagues who may now be at risk of harm as a result of being deported back from Pakistan to Afghanistan. Will he meet those of us who have constituency cases that we believe should meet his threshold for an intervention so that we can establish whether anyone has been missed out, and ensure that we do not miss out people who served with our colleagues for want of a piece of paper?

James Heapey: Of course I would like to meet the hon. Lady to discuss those cases. Given the way she described them, my instinct suggests that these may have been people who served in units that were mentored or partnered by the UK armed forces; indeed, my own battalion, on the tour on which it went shortly after I left, did exactly that with the kandaks who were based in Helmand at the time. That does not quite constitute what ARAP was set up to do, but I would love to sit down with the hon. Lady to talk through the details of the cases. If I am right and she is wrong, I should like to explain, and if she is right and I am wrong, we will of course look at the eligibility of those people.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am sure that the Minister will have heard some of the comments from senior former UK military leaders who have spoken about this issue in the last day or two. It sounds as if, somehow, the UK Government have deserted these Afghan heroes who supported us through the conflict. Can the Minister tell us whether any Afghans awaiting an ARAP decision have been deported from Pakistan to Afghanistan and are now at risk from the Taliban?

James Heapey: I do not have the number, and I am not sure how I would obtain it, but I will inquire within the Department whether I can. If I can, I will write to the hon. Gentleman, and if I cannot, I will write to him to say that I cannot.

To those of us who have served, the term that the hon. Gentleman used in the first part of his question has a particular meaning. I suspect that he meant it in that way, but that is not what has happened here. The offer that the UK has made in comparison with that of every other country, given our size and the size of our military commitment, is one of the most, if not the most, generous. We have worked incredibly hard to bring people out in very difficult circumstances, and it

breaks the heart of all those who had anything to do with operations in Afghanistan—on the military side, in the intelligence community or in a diplomatic context—not to be able to bring everyone here, but that is simply an unrealistic aim. ARAP was set up to be what it is, likewise the ACRS, and the hon. Gentleman, while disappointed in the Government's policy, will need to accept from me that we are working as hard as we can to bring both those schemes to a resolution as quickly as we can.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I thank the Minister for the helpful clarity that he has provided today, in particular on the eligibility of members of Afghan special forces for the ARAP scheme. That having been said, however, I would suggest that whether, and wherever, people are fighting alongside UK or other NATO troops in Afghanistan, they are still fighting the Taliban. They are still causing them attrition and losses and pressure, on whichever front that might be. I should have thought, at the very least, that under the ACRS, members of special forces have assisted in standing up for values such as free speech, women's rights and the rule of law. Given that they have done that, would not discretion be the better part of valour, especially when we are speaking about people who potentially fought with great valour? The Minister has talked about getting to the bottom of the list. That is great, but it is not the target; the target is to get everyone we possibly can back to safety in the UK and free from the clutches of the Taliban. Is that still the Minister's position?

James Heapey: I think I have answered that question, in different forms, over the past half-hour. It is the case, sadly, that not everyone who served alongside the British forces within an Afghan unit will be eligible. It is also impossible, I think, to verify the service of those who did not serve directly alongside the British armed forces, in circumstances in which there is someone within the British system who can vouch for the closeness of that service.

The sad reality is that there are tens of thousands of desperate people in Afghanistan who are wrongly applying to the ARAP scheme out of desperation—the same is happening with the ACRS—and showing evidence that is not real. We have done our absolute best over the last two years to find the people we are looking for and to verify the service of those who are not on employment lists. Our efforts in those regards across the UK special forces intelligence community and the military have been extensive, but it would be impossible to just say that everyone who had served in one unit could come, because we would have no way of knowing who had and who had not.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for responding to urgent question. We are now going to move on to the presentation of Bills, which should at least shorten our winter because we have a number of them. In order to save time and get on with today's main business, for Members presenting more than one consecutive Bill, I will accept private notice of the Second Reading dates for those Bills. Those dates will be minuted accordingly in *Hansard* and in the *Votes and Proceedings*. Members presenting individual Bills will name the date for Second Reading as usual.

BILLS PRESENTED

INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Fiona Bruce presented a Bill to require the Prime Minister to appoint a Special Envoy for International Freedom of Religion or Belief; to establish an Office of the Special Envoy; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 39).

CHILDREN IN HOSPITAL FOR EXTENDED PERIODS (REPORT TO PARLIAMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Oliver Heald presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of providing financial support for parents of children receiving care in hospital for extended periods.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 40).

CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Paul Beresford presented a Bill to create an offence of child criminal exploitation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 41).

ARMS TRADE (INQUIRY AND SUSPENSION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Zarah Sultana presented a Bill to make provision for an inquiry into the end use of arms sold to foreign states to determine whether they have been used in violation of international law; to immediately suspend the sale of arms to foreign states where it cannot be demonstrated that arms sold will not be used in violation of international law; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 42).

ONLINE SERVICES (CANCELLATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Natalie Elphicke presented a Bill to provide that, if a service can be subscribed to online, it must be possible to cancel that subscription online; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 April 2024, and to be printed (Bill 43).

ACCESS TO TELECOMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Helen Morgan presented a Bill to require providers of electronic communications networks to grant other such providers access to their apparatus where that is necessary to ensure consistent network coverage; to prevent those providers from charging more than the standard market rate for such access; to require the regulator to impose penalties on providers who unreasonably fail to grant such access; to make provision for the purpose of incentivising providers to allow customers of other providers to use their networks where access cannot be granted to their apparatus; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 44).

DOGS (PROTECTION OF LIVESTOCK)
(AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Thérèse Coffey, supported by Sarah Dines, Sir Robert Goodwill, Selaine Saxby, Philip Dunne, Caroline Nokes, Stephen Hammond, Virginia Crosbie, Craig Williams, Alicia Kearns, Kit Malthouse and Robin Millar presented a Bill to make provision changing the law about the offence of livestock worrying, including changes to what constitutes an offence and increased powers for investigation of suspected offences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 45).

MULTI-STOREY CAR PARKS (SAFETY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Maria Eagle presented a Bill to increase the minimum required height of guarding in multi-storey car parks; to make provision about the height of guarding in existing multi-storey car parks; to require 24 hour staffing of multi-storey car parks; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 46).

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (RECRUITMENT AND
RETENTION OF STAFF IN RURAL AREAS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Jamie Stone presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy for the recruitment and retention of health and social care staff in rural areas; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 47).

CONSULAR ASSISTANCE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christine Jardine presented a Bill to make provision for a right to consular assistance for British citizens abroad in cases where there has been, or where there is a risk of, a breach of human rights, denial of access to legal representation, or torture or other human rights abuses; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 48).

CHILDREN NOT IN SCHOOL
(REGISTERS, SUPPORT AND ORDERS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mrs Flick Drummond, supported by Mr Robin Walker, Ian Mearns, Sir Gavin Williamson and Dr Caroline Johnson presented a Bill to make provision about the maintenance of registers by local authorities of children in their area who are not full-time pupils at any school; to make provision about support by local authorities to promote the education of such children; to make provision about school attendance orders; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 50).

BULLYING AND RESPECT AT WORK BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rachael Maskell, supported by Andy McDonald, Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck, John McDonnell, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Imran Hussain, Caroline Lucas, Andrew Jones, Beth Winter, Rachel Hopkins, Ian Mearns and Yasmin Qureshi, presented a Bill to provide for a statutory definition of bullying at work; to make provision relating to bullying at work, including to enable claims relating to workplace bullying to be considered by an employment tribunal; to provide for a Respect at Work Code to set minimum standards for positive and respectful work environments; to give powers to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission to investigate workplaces and organisations where there is evidence of a culture of, or multiple incidents of, bullying and to take enforcement action; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 7 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 52).

GROCERIES CODE ADJUDICATOR
(POWERS AND DUTIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Alistair Carmichael presented a Bill to make provision about the powers and duties of the Groceries Code Adjudicator; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 53).

PRISON MEDIA BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Katherine Fletcher presented a Bill to prohibit the creation and uploading of unauthorised media content relating to prisons.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 55).

PETS (MICROCHIPS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

James Daly presented a Bill to make provision regarding pets with microchips; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 56).

PUPPY IMPORT (PROHIBITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to prohibit the import of young puppies; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 57).

WORKERS (RIGHTS AND DEFINITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to make provision about workers' rights; to amend the definition of worker; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 April 2024, and to be printed (Bill 58).

COURTS (REMOTE HEARINGS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Andy Carter presented a Bill to allow for certain civil and family court hearings to be conducted remotely.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 59).

TITLES DEPRIVATION ACT 1917 AMENDMENT BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Bob Seely presented a Bill to amend the Titles Deprivation Act 1917 to deprive in certain circumstances Princes of their British Dignities and Titles.

Bill read the first time; to be read a Second time on Friday 14 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 60).

SUPPORT FOR INFANTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sally-Ann Hart presented a Bill to require the provision of information relating to support available for parents and carers of infants for the purpose of supporting those infants; to require the Government to publish an annual report on the support available for infants and the impact that that support has had on outcomes for infants and children; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 61).

ANIMAL WELFARE
(RESPONSIBILITY FOR DOG ATTACKS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Anna Firth presented a Bill to amend the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to require a person in charge of a dog to take all reasonable steps to ensure that that dog does not fatally injure another dog; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 May 2024, and to be printed (Bill 62).

VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS ACT (REVIEW) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to review, and publish a report on, the merits of increasing the relevant statutory sum under the Vaccine Damage Payments Act 1979 for all claims since 1 January 2020 by an amount representing the amount of inflation since 2007.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 14 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 63).

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE (DUTIES OF LOCAL
AUTHORITIES AND PROPRIETORS OF SCHOOLS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Vicky Ford presented a Bill to make provision requiring local authorities to exercise their functions with a view to improving and promoting regular attendance by registered pupils at schools in their area; and to make provision requiring school proprietors to have an attendance policy to promote regular attendance.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 64).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (PAY ACCOUNTABILITY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Paul Bristow presented a Bill to make provision about the approval of remuneration paid to local government employees.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 65).

CHALK STREAMS (PROTECTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sarah Green presented a Bill to provide for a category of protection for chalk streams for the purpose of providing additional protections from pollution, abstraction and other forms of environmental damage; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 66).

CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF
MARINE BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
(RATIFICATION OF TREATY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Kevin Foster, supported by Dr Thérèse Coffey, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the ratification by the United Kingdom of the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 67).

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT
(OIL AND GAS COMPANIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Richard Burgon presented a Bill to require the Leader of the House of Commons to move a Motion prohibiting Members of Parliament from receiving any financial or other benefit from oil and gas companies; to require the Leader of the House to publish proposals for divestment of the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund from oil and gas companies; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 68).

LANDLORD AND TENANT ACT 1985
(AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Fleur Anderson presented a Bill to require landlords in the private rented sector to remedy hazards in leased dwellings; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 69).

ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON (LEASES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Bob Blackman, supported by Dr Thérèse Coffey, presented a Bill to amend the Crown Estate Act 1961 to increase the maximum term of the lease that may be granted to the Zoological Society of London in respect of land in Regent's Park.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 70).

FERTILITY TREATMENT (EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Nickie Aiken presented a Bill to require employers to allow employees to take time off from work for appointments for fertility treatment; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 71).

WATER QUALITY MONITORING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Richard Foord presented a Bill to confer powers on and place duties on the Environment Agency in respect of the monitoring of water quality; to make provision about environmental permits for water discharge activities; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 72).

CANCER RESEARCH FUNDING (REPORT TO PARLIAMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament an annual report on the allocation of research funding into cancers with the lowest survival rates in the UK, including lung, liver, brain, pancreatic cancer, and certain childhood cancers, including an assessment of the options for increasing funding for research with the aim of increasing survival rates for those cancers; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 73).

PALESTINE STATEHOOD (RECOGNITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the recognition of the State of Palestine.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 74).

SOCIAL ENERGY TARIFF BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Marion Fellows presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a social tariff for energy.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 77).

TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE (CONSULTATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dame Diana Johnson, supported by Karl Turner and Emma Hardy, presented a Bill to make provision about mandatory local consultation in relation to the installation of telecommunications infrastructure in residential areas; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 79).

CARERS AND CARE WORKERS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Helen Morgan presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish and implement a Care Workers Employment Strategy, with the aim of improving the recruitment and retention of care workers; to establish an independent National Care Workers Council with responsibility for setting professional standards for care workers, for establishing a system of professional qualifications and accreditation for care workers, and for advising the Government on those matters; to require the Secretary of State to commission an independent assessment of the support available to unpaid carers, including financial support and employment rights; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 80).

BUS SERVICES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Helen Morgan presented a Bill to place a duty on the Government to ensure that every town with a population of more than 10,000 people has a regular bus service operating seven days a week, and that local health services, including hospitals and GP surgeries, are served by those buses; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 81).

VETERANS (NON-CUSTODIAL SENTENCES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Owen Thompson presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish annual data relating to veterans who are given non-custodial sentences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 82).

NUCLEAR VETERANS (COMPENSATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Owen Thompson presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a compensation scheme for veterans who have experienced ill health as a result of exposure to radiation while on active service.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 83).

EMPLOYMENT EQUALITY (INSURANCE ETC) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mrs Natalie Elphicke presented a Bill to amend Schedule 9 to the Equality Act 2010 to prohibit age discrimination by employers in relation to the provision of insurance or a related financial service; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 84).

PUBLIC LIABILITY (COMPULSORY INSURANCE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mrs Natalie Elphicke presented a Bill to require companies and certain other persons to insure against their liability for injury to third parties and premises; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 85).

BRITISH GOODS
(PUBLIC SECTOR PURCHASING DUTY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to place a duty on public bodies to have a presumption in favour of purchasing goods of British origin in purchasing decisions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 86).

CONSUMER PRICING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to prohibit the practice of offering preferential pricing to new customers compared to existing customers; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 87).

BROADCASTING (LISTED SPORTING EVENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to expand the list of sporting events that must be made available for broadcast by free-to-air television channels; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 88).

EMPLOYMENT (APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to regulate the use of minimum qualification or experience requirements in job applications; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 89).

PUBLIC SECTOR WEBSITE IMPERSONATION BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to create the offence of impersonating a public sector website for the purpose of collecting payment or personal data; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 90).

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE (RECOGNITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to require His Majesty's Government to formally recognise the Armenian genocide of 1915-16.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 91).

HOUSE OF LORDS (HEREDITARY PEERS
(ABOLITION OF BY-ELECTIONS)) (NO. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Spellar presented a Bill to amend the House of Lords Act 1999 so as to abolish the system of by-elections for hereditary peers.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 92).

FOOD POVERTY STRATEGY BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy for ending the need for food banks by 2030; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 93).

DEDUCTIONS FROM UNIVERSAL CREDIT (REPORT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the impact of deductions from Universal Credit on levels of destitution among claimants.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 94).

CORPORATE HOMICIDE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to amend the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007 to make provision about the offence of corporate homicide; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 95).

ASYLUM SEEKERS

(ACCOMMODATION EVICTION PROCEDURES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to make provision for asylum seekers to challenge the proportionality of a proposed eviction from accommodation before an independent court or tribunal; to establish asylum seeker accommodation eviction procedures for public authorities; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 96).

HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to amend the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 to make provision about civil liability for breaches of health and safety duties, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 April 2024, and to be printed (Bill 97).

BENEFIT SANCTIONS (WARNINGS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to make provision for warnings to be given to benefit claimants before they are given sanctions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 May 2024, and to be printed (Bill 98).

HOUSING STANDARDS
(REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to make provision for national minimum standards in accommodation offered to refugees and asylum seekers; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 7 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 99).

DISABILITY BENEFIT ASSESSMENTS (RECORDING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that applicants for Disability Benefit are given the option of their eligibility assessment being audio recorded; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 14 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 100).

FULL EMPLOYMENT BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to place a duty on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to pursue a policy of full employment; to make associated provision for an employment guarantee scheme for benefit claimants who have been unemployed and looking for work for longer than six months; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 101).

UNIVERSAL CREDIT SANCTIONS
(ZERO HOURS CONTRACTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to amend the Welfare Reform Act 2012 to provide that a Universal Credit claimant may not be sanctioned for refusing work on a zero hours contract; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 102).

SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS (HEALTHY EATING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish annual calculations of benefit and tax credit rates that would be required for a representative household to afford to buy meals in accordance with the Eatwell Guide to eating healthily; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 January 2024, and to be printed (Bill 103).

DEVOLUTION (EMPLOYMENT) (SCOTLAND) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to amend the Scotland Act 1998 to grant legislative competence for employment matters to the Scottish Parliament.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 104).

PARLIAMENTARY AND HEALTH SERVICE OMBUDSMAN
(POWERS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to grant powers to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman to identify and investigate systemic problems in the benefits system and make associated recommendations to the Secretary of State; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 105).

UNDER-OCCUPANCY PENALTY (REPORT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of repealing those provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 which provide for persons to be paid reduced rates of housing benefit or universal credit because their accommodation is deemed to be under-occupied.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 106).

EVICTIONS (UNIVERSAL CREDIT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to prevent the evictions of Universal Credit claimants in rent arrears; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 1 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 107).

ASYLUM SEEKERS (PERMISSION TO WORK) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Chris Stephens presented a Bill to make provision for granting permission to work to asylum seekers who have waited six months for a decision on their asylum application; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 March 2024, and to be printed (Bill 108).

HIGHWAYS ACT 1980 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to amend section 58 of the Highways Act 1980 to restrict the defences available to highway authorities; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 109).

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to make provision about financial assistance to persons who have suffered disablement following vaccination against Covid-19 and to the next of kin of persons who have died shortly after vaccination against Covid-19; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of a no-fault compensation scheme to provide such financial assistance, on whether there should be any upper limit on the financial assistance available, on the criteria for eligibility and on whether payment should be made in all cases where there is no other reasonable cause for the death or disablement suffered; to provide for a special time limit under the Limitation Act 1980 for actions in respect of personal injury or death following a Covid-19 vaccination; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 110).

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS ACT 1946
(AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to provide that a draft statutory instrument which is subject to the affirmative resolution procedure may be amended by either House before it is approved; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 111).

DANGEROUS DOGS ACT 1991 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to provide that, before making any order to designate a type of dog for the purposes of section 1 or 2 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, the Secretary of State must carry out a public consultation and publish a comparative review of data showing the incidences of fatalities resulting from bites of dogs of that type in the last three years.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 112).

DANGEROUS DOGS (LICENSING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to provide for an exemption from the provisions of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 relating to dogs bred for fighting and other specially dangerous dogs for persons who hold a licence; to make provision relating to such licences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 113).

ARM'S-LENGTH BODIES
(ACCOUNTABILITY TO PARLIAMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to make provision for Arm's-Length Bodies to be directly accountable to Parliament.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 114).

EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX
(MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to exempt from Value Added Tax goods or services which are beneficial to the environment, to health and safety, to education or for charitable purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 115).

MOBILE HOMES ACT 1983 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to amend the Mobile Homes Act 1983; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 116).

ANONYMITY OF SUSPECTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to create an offence of disclosing the identity of a person who is the subject of an investigation in respect of the alleged commission of an offence; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 117).

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to establish an independent review of disablement caused by Covid-19 vaccinations and the adequacy of the compensation offered to persons so disabled; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 21 June 2024, and to be printed (Bill 118).

COVID-19 VACCINE DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to improve the diagnosis and treatment of persons who have suffered or continue to suffer ill effects from Covid-19 vaccines; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 119).

DOMESTIC ENERGY (VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to exempt from VAT supplies of electricity, oil and gas for domestic purposes; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 120).

PUBLIC HEALTH (CONTROL OF DISEASE) ACT 1984
(AMENDMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to amend the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 to make provision about parliamentary scrutiny of regulations made under that Act; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 121).

CARAVAN SITE LICENSING
(EXEMPTION OF MOTOR HOMES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to exempt motor homes from caravan site licensing requirements; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 122).

NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to make provision about arranging alternative non-NHS England treatment for patients who have waited for more than one year for hospital treatment; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 123).

BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION
(PRIVATISATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to make provision for the privatisation of the British Broadcasting Corporation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 124).

CHILDREN'S CLOTHING (VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to extend the definition of children's clothing for the purposes of exemption from VAT; to extend the VAT exemption to further categories of school uniform; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 125).

BBC LICENCE FEE NON-PAYMENT
(DECriminalISATION FOR OVER-75s) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to de-criminalise the non-payment of the BBC licence fee by persons aged over seventy-five; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 126).

REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to require a Regulatory Impact Assessment to be published for all primary and secondary legislation introduced by the Government; to make provision for associated sanctions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 127).

BARNETT FORMULA (REPLACEMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to require the Chancellor of the Exchequer to report to Parliament on proposals to replace the Barnett Formula used to calculate adjustments to public expenditure allocated to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with a statutory scheme for the allocation of resources based on an assessment of relative needs; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 128).

RULE OF LAW

(ENFORCEMENT BY PUBLIC AUTHORITIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to require public authorities to exercise their statutory powers to investigate and take enforcement action for breaches of the law; to make provision for sanctions for failing to take such action; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 129).

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to create offences in respect of persons who have entered the UK illegally or who have remained in the UK without legal authority; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 130).

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE CO-FUNDING AND
CO-PAYMENT BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to make provision for co-funding and for the extension of co-payment for NHS services in England; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 131).

CARAVAN SITES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to amend the requirements for caravan site licence applications made under the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 132).

PUBLIC SECTOR EXIT PAYMENTS (LIMITATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to limit exit payments made by some public sector organisations to employees; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 133).

GREEN BELT (PROTECTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Sir Edward Leigh, presented a Bill to establish a national register of Green Belt land in England; to restrict the ability of local authorities to de-designate Green Belt land; to make provision about future development of de-designated Green Belt land; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 134).

SECURE 16 TO 19 ACADEMIES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Caroline Johnson presented a Bill to make provision about the notice period for termination of funding agreements for secure 16 to 19 Academies; to make provision about the Secretary of State's duty to consider the impact on existing educational institutions when it is proposed to establish or expand a secure 16 to 19 Academy; and to alter the consultation question required when it is proposed to establish or expand a secure 16 to 19 Academy.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 135).

AFFORDABLE HOUSING (CONVERSION OF COMMERCIAL PROPERTY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Vicky Ford presented a Bill to make provision to enable local authorities to establish planning obligations relating to affordable housing in respect of the conversion of commercial property to residential use; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 February 2024, and to be printed (Bill 136).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We have a lot to look forward to on Fridays next year. I look forward to seeing you all. *[Interruption.]* Well, some of you.

Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill

Second Reading

5.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before proceeding to the heart of the Bill, may I offer a few words of thanks to those who have laboured long in this field? We all know that leasehold and freehold legislation has preoccupied the House not just in this Parliament, but in many Parliaments in the past. Indeed, in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, much of the House's time was taken up debating the finer points of such legislation. I was once described as a young man in a hurry. I am now an old man, but I am still in a hurry, in order to make sure that this legislation makes progress and that we liberate leaseholders from many of the unfair practices to which they are still subject.

I will say a bit more about that in a second, but I want first to say a special word of thanks to my predecessors as Secretary of State, who helped to issue the consultations and lay the groundwork for the measures that we are introducing today. I thank my right hon. Friends the Members for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), but in particular I thank the late James Brokenshire, who did so much work to get us to this point. Having thanked them, I cannot but thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who was a brilliant colleague in the Department and did so much of the heavy lifting to ensure that this legislation was ready to be introduced. She has been a brilliant colleague and a great Minister in so many ways. All the good things in the Bill are down to her; anything that is lacking is down to me.

I also thank members of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform, who have worked so hard for so long to ensure that the ground could be laid for today's legislation. I thank the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for his work and, in particular, his predecessor, the former MP for Poplar and Limehouse, Jim Fitzpatrick. I must thank the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who has been the single most consistent and bravest voice in standing up for leaseholders. I also thank—even though she is not in the Chamber—the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), who speaks on behalf of the Liberal Democrats and has contributed to the work of the APPG.

The APPG would not have been able to do its work without the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership. In particular, I thank Martin Boyd, who has been hired by the Government to head up our Leasehold Advisory Service, and Sebastian O'Kelly. Both have contributed to helping leaseholders and providing them with the advice and counsel they need to navigate this tangled landscape. I also thank the campaigners, some of whom I had a chance to talk to earlier, who have been indefatigable in making it clear that the law needs to change. I thank, in particular, Katie Kendrick, Cath Williams and Joanne Darbyshire, all of whom have made an impeccable case for change throughout.

[Michael Gove]

What is the problem that we are trying to solve? Basically, it is this: leasehold as a form of tenure is essentially a deal where someone is invited to buy a home and then, instead of becoming a full homeowner, they are treated, or can be treated, as a tenant. It is a fundamentally unfair system and a fundamentally inequitable tenure, because those who buy flats and—increasingly, in recent years—houses, in good faith, paying market rates, assuming and hoping that they would be homeowners in the fullest sense of the word, have found that, rather than being homeowners, they are at the whim of the ultimate owner of the freehold, who is in effect their landlord.

In the past, there were justifications. There were cases and examples where those who held the freehold operated in an enlightened and paternalistic way. For example, the freehold of properties was sometimes held by trade unions or other enlightened organisations that would ensure that the common interests of all those within a particular building were looked after. It is still the case that some landowners and freeholders take their obligations towards leaseholders seriously, ensure that the service charges are levied in an appropriate way, keep the ground rent at an appropriately low level, and ensure that the building is maintained in a good state of repair. However, individual leaseholders should not simply have to rely on the good will and good character of whoever the freeholder is; they need better protection in law, which is what we seek to achieve with the Bill.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Many of the leasehold homes in Rother Valley were built by the National Coal Board to provide homes for miners and their families, with the intention that the ground rent would be peppercorn, but since the closure of the pits many of those freeholds, especially in areas such as Thurcroft, Wales and North Anston, have been sold to private developers who are taking advantage of their leaseholders. For example, in Thurcroft, leaseholders were forced to represent themselves in court when the freeholder tried to raise the ground rent from £10 a year to £2,500 a year, which is absolutely shameful. How can we ensure that freeholders must act reasonably, and not stray too far from the spirit of the original legislation?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The miners' families and their descendants, whom he represents so well, were originally in homes that the NCB established to ensure that those in the pit villages he represents would have a proper landlord, providing stewardship, care and support, but as he rightly points out, the freehold ownership has subsequently been used not as an obligation towards the leaseholder but as a commodity to be traded. More and more freeholds are in the hands of entities, often based offshore, that regard them as a licence to extort from the leaseholder, rather than as an obligation to be discharged.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have raised concerns on behalf of leaseholders in my constituency on many occasions in this House—particularly on the issue of service charges, which the Secretary of State referred to a moment ago, and the lack of transparency around them. I have seen again and again cases where certain information is not provided to leaseholders, where they are not sure that the moneys

are being spent on what they have provided funding for, or where it is not clear whether, for example, there has been an adequate tendering process for works, insurance and so on. Can he explain what will be done on that, and whether it will fully extend to England and Wales? What co-operation has he had with the Welsh Government about those provisions?

Michael Gove: It is the case that this Bill covers England and Wales. Obviously the hon. Gentleman is aware that there are slightly different tribunals that operate in each jurisdiction, but it will precisely address the situation he mentioned: it will ensure there is transparency over service charges and, through the appropriate tribunal in each jurisdiction it will become easier on the part of the leaseholder to contest any unfairness.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Gove: I just want to make one or two additional points and then I am happy to give way.

Personally, one of the moments where I realised that the system, which is hard to defend in any case, was fundamentally broken was in the aftermath of the Grenfell tragedy. We knew then that it was important that responsibility be taken for remediating buildings that were unsafe. We knew then that individuals and organisations had to take that responsibility on their own shoulders. We knew then that freeholders, if they were true to the spirit of the original legislation, would say, “Yes, we have a responsibility for this building and for all those within it. We have a responsibility to make sure this building is safe. Therefore, we should have a responsibility to pay for the remediation.”

But did we find freeholders queueing up to do that? Absolutely not. They were there ready to extract income at the highest possible rate whenever they could, through ground rents and service charges, but when they were called upon to discharge their responsibility to the leaseholders within those flats, they were absent. They ran away from their responsibilities. That is why I have limited to no patience now with the well-funded lobby groups that stand up for those freeholders and seek to ensure that they can continue to extract money from leaseholders. It seems to me that, at a critical point, the argument that is sometimes made on behalf of those people disappeared because of their negligence and their moral fault.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman says that traditionally it was flats that were leasehold, but increasingly it was houses, mainly fuelled by the Government's Help to Buy scheme. In my constituency, Persimmon Homes's business model was structured around not only selling on the leaseholds, but the tactic of including areas of the estate that traditionally would have been passed over to local authorities as the responsibility of the leaseholders. Would he agree that the Government need to take some responsibility for the tsunami of money they threw at some of those developers, and for turning a blind eye to what they were doing in their business models?

Michael Gove: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point, but he is conflating two things. Help to Buy can be criticised or defended on its own terms, and I believe it was the right intervention to ensure, in particular, that

more first-time buyers could get on to the property market. However, he is also right that leasehold, which as he says was originally a tenure designed for flats, was then extended to houses, and in a way that is difficult to defend. It has expanded over recent years. That is why we are legislating now to ensure that we can stop it. There are two separate arguments that can be had there.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I particularly look forward to that part of the Secretary of State's speech when he will tell us whether this will apply to new leaseholds or will be retrospective on those suffering under existing leasehold arrangements. However, there is one step the Government took that has not been helpful to leaseholders, and of which I have personal experience: creating a presumption in favour of developments where the airspace above a block of flats is sold and the freeholder then insists on having one or two more floors built on top. That can cause immense damage to the building, not to mention disruption, and then who gets the bill for paying for the damage? It is transferred from the freeholder to the leaseholders. The Government should think again about that presumption in allowing that sort of ill-considered development.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes an important point on permitted development rights. On the whole, I am in favour of the extension of permitted development rights, because I want to see an increase in housing supply overall, but it is incumbent on the Government to review how those rights have been operating. He raises one concern, but there are other legitimate concerns about the way permitted development rights, when commercial buildings have been turned into residential, have meant that the quality of those new residential flats has been insufficiently high. I also know that colleagues, not least in London, are concerned about potential future extensions of permitted development rights. There is a responsibility on me and others to review their impact, and that is what we are doing, separate from this particular legislation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Michael Gove: An embarrassment of riches! I will give way to all colleagues currently standing, and then I will try to make progress.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I represent an area with a lot of leasehold houses. It is just a cynical money-making scam. Some people own a house but are required to pay an admin charge to change the flooring or have a pet, so it does not feel as if they own it. I can understand the flooring thing if they are in flats, but not if they are in houses. It is just a con.

Michael Gove: I couldn't agree more.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): One of the challenges here is the lack of voice for our constituents in trying to address the problems. The Secretary of State says that he cannot defend leasehold. None of us can. It is a feudal process that still denies our constituents a voice over the thing that is most precious to them: their home. If he agrees with that, why will he not agree with us that we should move forward to commonhold, whereby everybody has a voice and a say in their own building?

Michael Gove: I actually agree that commonhold is the ideal form of tenure, but there are certain technical questions about when commonhold can apply, not least if a building also has commercial uses on the lower floors.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When we come to clause 27, will the Secretary of State clarify whether "best value" applies to leaseholders or to freeholders? It certainly seems that leaseholders do not get best value when testing what additionalities and enhancements are put into their schemes.

Michael Gove: That is certainly true and I quite agree.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Secretary of State was talking about leasehold houses. I was recently visited by a group of residents from Hampton Wick in my constituency who have been collectively trying to buy the freehold on their houses. They have a very obstructive freeholder and are now resorting to an enfranchisement notice under section 5 of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967, but that requires a valuation from 1965, for which there are no records available, so they are now being obstructed in buying the freehold by that legislative basis. When the Bill introduces a new methodology for calculating the value of enfranchisement, will that old provision be got rid of?

Michael Gove: I believe that it should be, and I encourage the hon. Lady's constituents—as I am sure she has done—to be in touch with Martin Boyd's Leasehold Advisory Service to be absolutely clear that they are getting the support they need.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is a little disappointing that the Secretary of State did not refer to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee's report of 2019. The Government, working with the APPG, have followed many of the report's recommendations, but some of those recommendations—we will come to them later, with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker—have not been included, so I will make just a couple of points.

The real challenge is, first, that freeholders who will not comply with any legislation, or will try to avoid it, do not reply to letters. I have exchanged information with the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety on how to deal with Coppen Estates and what the penalties will be for non-compliance. Secondly, there are freeholders who seek to move the ownership of a property around in order to avoid the legislation. Why not give existing leaseholders the right of first refusal before any freehold is sold?

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman and his Committee for all their work—it was discourteous of me, when running through the names of those to whom I am grateful, not to mention them. His broader point, about not just the operation of the freehold system but the way in which different aspects of the property market work, is a fair one. The use of opaque overseas entities and special purpose vehicles—the way in which ultimate beneficial ownership can be hidden—are all problems that require to be addressed. The Bill is pretty lengthy and substantial, and deals with many of the issues—I will go on to explain why we have taken the approach that we have—but there are other abuses within the property and land market system that require

[*Michael Gove*]

to be addressed, which we will address, and not just in this Parliament but after we are returned at the next general election.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way, and for the pragmatic approach that the Government have taken in this very complex area. In my constituency of Dover and Deal, we have a failed development—Sunningdale homes—and a long-standing problem with Persimmon Homes in relation to Sholden. Both situations relate to the lack of adoption by local authorities, and to service charges and other management arrangements. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend could say more about the way in which those sorts of situations will be helped, and whether there will be any retrospective help for situations that have remained unresolved for many years.

Michael Gove: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. She and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) have been particularly energetic in pressing me to deal with this issue of leasehold homes—fleecehold estates, as they have become widely known—which is, I believe, precisely the phenomenon that the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) was also referring to.

The Bill will ensure that there is a ban on new leasehold homes, but as well as averting that problem in the future, we are attempting to deal with the difficult situation we have all inherited. We will do so by making sure that we squeeze every possible income stream that freeholders currently use, so that in effect, their capacity to put the squeeze on leaseholders ends. That will mean the effective destruction of the leasehold system. Do not take my word for it: as Sebastian O’Kelly of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership has made clear in his writing,

“The Bill is a full-on assault on leasehold’s income streams”.

First, we have a consultation on ground rents. I cannot pre-empt that consultation, but at its conclusion, we will legislate on the basis of that set of responses in order to ensure that ground rents are reduced, and can only be levied in a justifiable way. As I say, I cannot pre-empt the consultation, but in a way I already have, because I was asked by the Select Committee last week what my favoured approach would be, and I believe that it should be a peppercorn. Of course, if compelling evidence is produced, as a Secretary of State with great civil servants, I will look at it, but my preference is clear, and I suspect that it is the preference of the House as well.

Indeed, it is important to say that that particular squeezing of the freeholder’s income stream goes beyond what the Law Commission recommended. We are really grateful for all of the Law Commission’s work, but it was a little bit cautious in this area; we are deliberately saying no. I know that some people will say, “What about A1P1 rights under the European convention on human rights? You are taking property away from people.” I respect the ECHR, but if it stands in the way of me defending the interests of people in this country who have been exploited by ground-rent massaging, I am determined to legislate on behalf of those people, because their interests matter more than that particular piece of legislation.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the way he is addressing this issue. Can I draw his attention to a particular variant of this practice that exists in my constituency? Between a developer and a local authority, a scheme was allowed whereby residents were—and continue to be—charged for access to public open space on their estate and, indeed, to maintain a neighbouring park that residents across the district can enjoy. That is surely wrong, and I hope he will look into that matter.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: a number of the people who have built, operated and retain the freehold on these estates levy service charges for all sorts of things that, in my view, are totally inappropriate. That is why the Bill makes clear that service charges have to be issued in a standardised format, so that they can be more easily scrutinised and challenged. It also makes clear that those charges can be challenged in such a way as to ensure that egregious examples, such as the one the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, will end.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am not against what the Secretary of State is trying to do, but philosophically there is a reason why the Conservative party has been the defender of property rights. It is to do with freedom and established rights, so it is nothing to do with the ECHR or anything like that. Before this debate becomes just about bashing landlords, what about the Duchy of Cornwall? There are excellent freeholders that have traditionally maintained properties and done wonderful work in ensuring that properties are well maintained and in looking after their tenants.

Michael Gove: I quite agree with my right hon. Friend. There are good landlords, and the Duchy of Cornwall has been a stand-out example, as have been the Cadogan estate, the Howard de Walden estate and so on—they are responsible landlords, absolutely—but an individual leaseholder should not have to rely on the good will and the grace of His Grace, as it were, to get the protection they need.

There is no stauncher defender of capitalism and property rights than me, but what has happened is that freeholds have become utterly torn away from the warp and weft of the capitalist system as we understand it in this country, and have become tradeable commodities that foreign entities are using to exploit our people who have worked hard and saved to get their own home. So whose side am I on—homeowners who have worked hard and saved up to secure a mortgage, or shadowy foreign entities that are essentially attempting to rip off British citizens? I am on the side of homeowners.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): When the Secretary of State is considering the evidence from the consultation he mentioned, will he adhere to his own adage of “follow the money”, and remember that those people advocating for a higher ground rent probably have a motivation for doing so?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is completely right. I will be looking at the responses to the consultation, and I am sure that some of London’s finest legal firms and most eloquent solicitors will be putting in some very thoughtful contributions, but the question will be: who is paying for them and how much are they being paid?

To my mind, people can buy silver-tongued eloquence, but what is far more important is actually being on the right side of justice.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: I believe that most of the people in the House are on the right side of justice, especially the hon. Lady.

Marsha De Cordova: On ground rents, shared owners who have staircased their way up to 100% and become leaseholders obviously have a long lease of 999 years, but face the issue of having their ground rents doubled every, say, 20 years. Clearly, that is an unfairness in the system, so will the Secretary of State's consultation address that point?

Michael Gove: I believe it will. I must now make progress because I know a number of people want to contribute, so I will try to run through the other arguments about why we are taking the approach that we are.

I mentioned service charges, and one other example, to which the Father of the House has of course persistently drawn our attention, of where those who have been managing properties on behalf of the ultimate owners have abused their position is that of insurance commissions. We will be taking steps in the Bill to make sure that insurance charges are transparent and that fair handling fees are brought in. The fact that I can list all these examples just shows hon. Members the way in which freeholders have operated. Many who have got hold of such freeholds have been thinking, "Right, okay, we can jack up the ground rent, great! We can have service charges, keep them opaque and add something. Tell you what—insurance; let's try to get more out of that." It is a persistent pattern of behaviour that does require reform.

Another pattern of behaviour is the way that lease extensions and the whole question of enfranchisement have been going. If someone's lease goes below 80 years and they want to enfranchise themselves, they have to pay what is called marriage value. That is the principle that, by bringing together the ownership of the freehold and the leasehold in one by enfranchising themselves—bringing those two together in a marriage—people are enriching themselves. Again, however, it has been used by freeholders to bilk leaseholders overall, which is why the approach we are taking will in effect eliminate marriage value. It is also why, when we talk about lease extension, instead of people having to extend and extend again generation after generation, we are saying that leases can be extended to 990 years. In effect, as I say, this will make sure that one of the approaches that freeholders have taken to extracting more cash from leaseholders will end.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State about the seriousness of the problem of excessive insurance premiums being charged to leaseholders, and I will give an example if I am able to contribute later. Does the Secretary of State agree that the solution requires risk-pooling among insurers? The initiative on that seems to have stalled; can he hold out the prospect of the delay being resolved?

Michael Gove: Broadly on the whole question of insurance, I am due to meet the chair, Baroness Morgan of Cotes, and the chief executive of the Association of British Insurers later this week to address not just that question but some other related questions.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Michael Gove: I won't at this stage.

I freely admit that this Bill does not go as far as some in the House and elsewhere would like. Strong arguments have been made about how property agents can be better regulated and Lord Best in another place has made arguments that I find incredibly persuasive—so why not legislate for them now? Well, as I mentioned earlier, this Bill has many clauses, deals with technical aspects of property law, requires close scrutiny and is likely to face a lobbying exercise from deep-pocketed interests outside attempting to derail it. Legislating to give effect to Lord Best's proposals and to set up a new regulator—I am always a wee bit wary about setting up new quangos but on this occasion he makes a good case—would require significant additional legislative time of a kind we simply do not have in the lifetime of this Parliament. There are changes we are making overall in order to deal with some of the abuses for which managing agents are responsible, but there is still some unfinished business. I happily grant that, and there are organisations like FirstPort, which many of us will be familiar with from our work as constituency MPs, that require some gentle direction towards behaving in a better fashion.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) and Ministers for bringing the Bill forward. The Secretary of State spoke about leasehold improvements and improving the rights of leaseholders, but he will be aware that part 4 of the Bill looks to protect and improve the rights of families who hold the freehold of their property against the estate management charges about which he is speaking; the Bill does a lot to meet some of the requests of many of my Conservative colleagues on this matter.

One issue that is not addressed in the Bill, however, is the right to manage. In the 2019 response to the 2017 consultation, the Government said they would look at that and introduce legislation. What is the current Government thinking on giving people the right to manage, and therefore to take back control from the estate management companies?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I was going to say there are two other areas in particular that we should look at in Committee: the right to manage; and the abuse of forfeiture, which is sometimes used by freeholders to intimidate leaseholders. I am very open to improving the Bill in Committee; we will be improving it ourselves by bringing forward the legislation that will ban new leasehold homes in the future, so I hope we will have a chance to do that.

I mentioned earlier that we have been debating leasehold and freehold in this place for a long time. In the preparation of this Bill, one of the brilliant civil servants in the Department drew to my attention comments made by Harry Levy-Lawson, 1st Viscount Burnham and MP

[Michael Gove]

for St Pancras, as it happens, when the Leasehold Enfranchisement Bill 1889 was brought forward by another great reforming Conservative Government under the Marquess of Salisbury.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): Hear, hear!

Michael Gove: Exactly: the Minister is, like me, a great fan of the Marquess.

In that debate the opening remarks of the Minister were:

“We do not claim for this Bill any perfection of draftsmanship, but it is so far complete that if it pass through Parliament, we believe it would be smooth, just and reliable in its working. The principle, however, is now exactly what it has always been, viz., the grant to urban leaseholders, with a substantial interest in their holdings, of the power to purchase the fee simple—the ownership—

“on fair and equitable terms.”—[*Official Report*, 1 May 1889; Vol. 335, c. 889.]

This Bill does so much more. Is it perfect? No, I would not claim for this Bill any perfection of draftsmanship. Is it substantive—does it move the dial, does it change the business model, will it effectively mean that leasehold will become a thing of the past? I believe absolutely it will, and I am fortified in that belief by the strong support for this legislation shown by leasehold campaigners. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.44 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to open this debate on behalf of the Opposition. Let me say at the outset that we do not intend to oppose the Bill today. Simply, it is better late than never. May I associate myself with the Secretary of State’s comments at the start of the debate, because many people have contributed and campaigned on this issue over the years that it has been spoken about? Many have long needed this overdue Bill, and they need it to be improved. Leaseholders across the country have been waiting for years—six years, to be exact—to see the Government’s flagship Bill to end leasehold and to break free the millions of people trapped in what the Secretary of State himself describes as a feudal and absurd system of home ownership.

If this is the Secretary of State going in a hurry, I would hate to see his normal pace. It was back in 2017 that his fifth predecessor as Housing Secretary pledged action. He talked a good talk today, and he is theatrical. I love the passion—it is really there—and I love the “squeeze”. We want to see the squeeze, but frankly I have lost count of the number of times Ministers have promised to finally put Britain in line with other developed countries across the world that have all ended this medieval system. To be fair to the Secretary of State, none of them has said it is an assault on leasehold and a squeeze on income, so he is going a little bit further, but after all that time and all those promises and after that theatrical squeeze, we still have a Bill that does not actually abolish leasehold. I suppose that that is no surprise, as it comes alongside a Bill that pledges to ban section 21 no-fault evictions that does not ban no-fault evictions and a Bill to stop the small boats that does not stop the small boats.

It is all well and good for the Secretary of State to say that the Government plan to amend the Bill in the usual way, but is it too much to ask for the Government to include a clause that bans leasehold in a Bill whose stated purpose was to ban leasehold? Why make those promises, only to produce a Bill that does no such thing? In a word, it sounds like chaos. Even the day before it was published, the Department’s press release said that the Bill would ban developers from selling new houses under leasehold. Given the tiny proportion of leaseholds that are houses, rather than flats, it is hardly an ambitious pledge, but the Bill does not even introduce that ban.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my right hon. Friend agree with what I said to the Secretary of State? The Government could have stopped this, if they had not done the Help to Buy scheme, which fuelled this practice among large developers. They could have stopped it in its tracks, if they had stopped the finance to those companies. Does she also agree that expectations have been raised among a lot of the leaseholders who were put into the trap of their houses being leasehold? They thought they were going to get out of that trap, when actually they are not.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. The Government have been in government for 13 years. We have had six years of these promises, and he is absolutely right that there is more than one way that the Government could have ensured that leaseholders were not treated in this way. The botched drafting of the Bill means we are still waiting to see a single clause that prohibits a single new leasehold property, whether it is a flat or a house.

It was on 30 January this year that the Secretary of State promised my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy),

“we will maintain our commitment to abolish the feudal system of leasehold. We absolutely will. We will bring forward legislation shortly.”—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2023; Vol. 727, c. 49.]

In February, he said he aimed in the forthcoming King’s Speech

“to introduce legislation to fundamentally reform the system...to end this feudal form of tenure”.—[*Official Report*, 20 February 2023; Vol. 728, c. 3.]

In May, the then Housing Minister told this House that “my Department are working flat out”—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 214.]

on the legislation. If it has taken them this long with not a word to show for it, can they guarantee that they will put their amendments to the House by 30 January next year—a full 12 months after the Secretary of State’s promise at the Dispatch Box?

We have heard the Secretary of State say that it is perfectly normal to bring forward vast swathes of amendments in Committee—believe me, the Committee will be doing some considerable heavy lifting. Having shadowed him through the final stages of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, I would say that perhaps he does think that making endless last-minute amendments to his own Bills is a normal way of legislating, but the anonymous sources close to the Secretary of State may have let the cat out of the bag about the real reason the Bill is so empty when they briefed the press last month. We know from them what he cannot admit today: the Prime Minister was blocking this Bill from the King’s Speech in the face of lobbying from vested interests

opposing the reform. In the chaos of this Government, it was added only at the very last minute. We may have heard many warm words, and the Secretary of State was very theatrical about his ambition for reform, but he is stuck in the daily Tory doom loop in which vested interests always come before the national interest.

The truth is that the time wasting and backtracking all go back to the Prime Minister's desperate attempt to extend the lease on No. 10 Downing Street. The fact is that even if the Government belatedly fix their leasehold house loophole, flat owners will be left out of the picture, yet 70% of all leasehold properties are flats and there are over 600,000 more owner-occupied leasehold flats than houses in England. Having listened to the Secretary of State, those owners will still be wondering just when the Government will fulfil their pledge to them. As I am sure everyone in the House will agree, property law is, by nature, extremely complex, but we cannot and must not lose sight of the daily impact that these laws have on the lives of millions across our country, including over 5 million owners of leasehold properties in England and Wales. I am sure that most of us in the House know what that means in human terms for our constituents.

For most freehold homeowners, ownership means security and control, yet for far too many leaseholders, the reality of home ownership falls woefully short of the dream they were promised. Too many leaseholders face constant struggles with punitive and ever rising ground rents—rent for a home that they actually own, in exchange for which the freeholder needs to do nothing at all. Leaseholders are locked into expensive agreements and face unjustified administration fees and extortionate charges. Conditions are imposed with little or no consultation. For leaseholders also affected by the building safety crisis, the situation is even worse.

Michael Gove: The right hon. Lady has made it clear from the Dispatch Box that she opposes excessive ground rents. Can she explain why the Labour leader made it clear at the Labour party conference that he would get new houses built by creating “attractive investment products” that had residential ground rents at their heart? How can it possibly be the case that she intends to deal with excessive ground rents, when the leader of the Labour party wanted to fund new development by pursuing precisely that policy? Which is it: against them or for them?

Angela Rayner: I thank the Secretary of State, but he has just used the word “excessive”. If he wants to let me deal with this problem, I am happy to take over and show that I am not just about theatrical performances at the Dispatch Box; I will actually deal with it. He has been given 13 years on the Government Benches and has failed to do that. This Bill still fails to do that, so I would like to see where he will deal with this issue.

Regulation of freeholders has fallen behind that of landlords, leaving leaseholders stripped of the rights enjoyed even by tenants in the private rented sector. Perhaps the Secretary of State can tell us what measures exist that prevent the worst actors in the market from repeatedly ripping off leaseholders in one place after another.

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend is making a strong speech, and she accurately describes the mental and financial anguish that has been felt by many

leaseholders in my constituency. She is absolutely right. In my constituency, this issue predominantly affects those in flats, not in leasehold houses, and what they have gone through with service charges and fire and building safety remediation has taken a toll on many of them. They have found themselves in despair. Does she agree that much more needs to be done to deal with managing agents on the transparency of service fees? It was good to hear the Secretary of State mention FirstPort, and I hope to meet it soon, but does she agree that this is a much wider problem that needs to be addressed?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree. As I said before, and as I think the Secretary of State acknowledged, there is a lot of work to be done in Committee on these issues. Hopefully, we will be able to help the Secretary of State improve his own Bill, which needs significant improvements.

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): I suspect that my right hon. Friend will welcome the strengthening of the regulation of management companies in the Bill, but we need to go further. Just last Friday, I had some heartbreaking conversations with residents on the Froghall Fields estate in Flitwick—a lovely part of the world with which I am sure many Members will be familiar from the by-election—who have been left brutally exposed to successive failed management companies by ongoing adoption conversations with the council that are dragging on and on. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is more we can do to strengthen the proposed regulations in this area, to ensure that my long-suffering residents finally get the redress and resolution they deserve?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I am so pleased about the work he has been doing since he was elected to this place and the way in which he has been a real champion of his constituents, which they did not feel they had previously. He makes a really important point, and he is right to point out the huge problem of estate agent charges and fees. The steps the Government are taking to address the issue are welcome, of course, but we absolutely believe there is room to improve the measures in the Bill. The shadow Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), will look to do so in Committee.

Mr Betts: Following on from that point, when the Select Committee looked at this issue—it is a real problem—we said that whenever a property is sold, the purchaser or leaseholder, and in some cases the freeholder, should have a right at the beginning to see precisely what the agreement was between the local authority and the developer about where responsibility for ongoing maintenance of the estate and so forth rests. Many purchasers simply do not know who to go to and who is responsible. It would be helpful if that was set out very clearly at the beginning of the purchase.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on his fabulous work in this area. Transparency is incredibly important because it is the first step towards getting accountability.

We spoke before about pets—we all love our pets—and the Secretary of State has rightly protected the reasonable right of tenants to keep pets, yet it is not clear whether he intends to extend that right to leaseholders. I have

[Angela Rayner]

seen leases that contain an outright ban, so I hope he ensures that the Bill reflects that. It is just one example of the restrictions that terms in leases increasingly impose, but I could cite many more—for example, basic modifications or decorations to flats, or the right to conduct business from home. I know that some Government Members may not be keen on working from home, but it is quite another thing to say that someone could lose their home over it. They might be more sympathetic if I point out the impact on the self-employed, who are often banned from running their own business from their own home.

There are basic principles at stake for the Opposition, and I hope the whole House can agree that people's rights to bring up a family, to care for a loved family pet, to own and run their own business, and to pay a fair price and receive what they have paid for are basic British rights and values. The incredible thing is that they are being denied to people in their very own homes—homes that they own. That is surely at the heart of today's debate, because for leaseholders, their flat or house is not an investment; it is their home—a place to live, to grow up, to grow old, to raise a family, to get on in life and to be part of a community. A home is more than bricks and mortar; it is about security and having power over your own life.

As a leaseholder, someone may have ownership but not control. The dream of home ownership has already slipped away from far too many, but it is less of a dream and more of a nightmare for too many who now achieve it. From what the Secretary of State has said, there is some agreement between us on the problems those people face, but the contents of the Bill do not quite match up to his sentiments or the energy that he brings to the Dispatch Box. So I hope that in winding up, the Minister will not just tell us exactly how far the Bill addresses the problems raised today but accept that we can work together in later stages to go further.

Rachael Maskell: This is a point that I wanted to make to the Secretary of State as well. There is a long-standing injustice for leaseholders who experience flooding as they currently do not have access to the Flood Re scheme. Will my right hon. Friend seek—I hope she will—to ensure a level playing field for leaseholders and freeholders in accessing the Flood Re scheme?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Just as the Secretary of State earlier brought enthusiasm to the Dispatch Box on cladding and some issues we faced there, I hope that, in Committee, we can explore that and the effect on people who have been affected more and more by flooding.

The Secretary of State may not have the support of his Prime Minister, or his Back Benchers—[*Interruption.*] Many of them are not here at the moment—watch this space!

On the Labour Benches, we are united behind the decisive action that leaseholders need. If the Government cannot deliver it, we are ready to do so. A Labour Government will make commonhold the default tenure for all new properties as part of our commitment to fundamentally and comprehensively reform the leasehold system. We will also enact the Law Commission's recommendations on enfranchisement, commonhold and the right to manage in full.

The fact is, unless and until leaseholders of houses and flats get a renewed commitment from Ministers on all the Law Commission's recommendations, leaseholders will reasonably conclude that the Government have scaled down their ambition with the scaled-back Bill before us. Leaseholders deserve to know the real reason why they are being fobbed off with such limited steps. Unfortunately, the answer, as ever, lies in the chaos of this Government. The Secretary of State has talked a good game, but he might be the only functional cog in a dysfunctional Government—there is a compliment in there; I am trying. [*Laughter.*] I hope that he will face down his Prime Minister and his own Back Benchers and accept Labour's proposals to make the Bill meet the challenges of the moment. But if he does not, a Labour Government will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Father of the House.

6.2 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will be grateful to know that the official Opposition support what the Government are trying to do. I pay tribute, as the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State did, to the people in the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform—Liberals, Labour, Conservatives and others—who, over the last 11 years, have worked together to try to get to a situation where it is not possible for freeholders, on purpose or by mistake, to exploit residential leaseholders.

When I first spoke on this issue about 11 years ago, I declared my interest as a leaseholder in my constituency with no problems whatsoever. Six of us bought the freehold willingly from a willing seller—the person who developed the block of flats—when he retired. I have since acquired an interest in another leasehold property. I do not take part in these debates to try to feather my own nest; I am trying to ensure that the 5 million people who are in a worse position have as good an experience as I have had.

It is 10 years since I first started quoting Leasehold Knowledge Partnership. In addition to Sebastian O'Kelly and Martin Boyd, whom the Secretary of State referred to as well as the campaigners in the National Leasehold Campaign, I would like to name one or two journalists who have helped—in particular, the people at “Newsnight”—and the people who have batted away at the issue. Major media organisations ought to have a housing correspondent or editor rather than putting it with home affairs. We cannot expect Mark Easton at the BBC, when he covers the Home Office, to be able to become expert in residential leasehold in the way that is needed.

I hope that in Committee, and especially in the House of Lords, the parts of the Law Commission's recommendations that have not been incorporated in the Bill will be put forward for decision by the House and the other place. The three reports that it produced in 2020 should be implemented in full, or else, when those reports came out the Government should have said what was wrong with the proposals.

May I emphasise what the Secretary of State said about the ongoing consultation and continuing conversation on modern leasehold—the ground rent issue—where the period of consultation has been extended from,

I think, late-December to the middle of January? People will be grateful for that. There are five options. As Dean Buckner, a trustee of LKP, the campaigning charity, has said, those who own freehold interests have known since Scotland abolished leasehold that the gravy train was going to end. When the Government came forward with the proposal that ground rent should not be more than 0.1% of the capital value, they knew that their value was not as high as some were estimating, and when people start looking at the discount rate—I think in the impact assessment it is about 3.5%; in fact, long-term debt for the Government is now at 4.5%—they see that that again will reduce it. I make the suggestion, which is also on the LKP website, that the Government can deal with any possible compensation by saying that they will tax it at 45% or higher, which will make attempts by people to take it to judicial review or challenges to the Government on human rights terms null and void, or at least not worth trying.

May I say to the Government that after the Grenfell fire tragedy, while it became clear that up to £15 billion of remediation was needed not just for cladding but for other fire defects and that the only people who could eventually pay those costs by law would be the leaseholders who own not a brick in the building, the people who ought to be paying are the insurers for those who were responsible—the designers, the architects, the builders, the developers, the subcontractors, the component manufacturers and the like; they were all insured? I commend to the House that, in Committee, it should somehow be written into the Bill that potential claims by leaseholders be gathered together in an agency, which could sue the insurance companies and those they insured to get a contribution from them. That would reduce the costs both to leaseholders and to the Government, who have been providing a lot of money to try to ensure that remediation has happened.

I pay tribute to successive Secretaries of State, who have had to give written instructions to their permanent secretaries for some of the compensation for fire defect costs, and I say to the Government that the artificial distinction of 11 metres is unjustified. Actually, fire death certificates show that more people die in fires in lower buildings, and higher buildings are not riskier. We ought to try to recognise the realities. It is also worth saying in passing that when Dame Judith Hackitt produced her report and recommendations, I do not think she was well briefed on the law on leasehold, which is why some of her recommendations were not properly appropriate. I am glad that since Gavin Barwell we have had a succession of Ministers who have put the Government on the side of leaseholders; we now know that there are 5 million to 6 million of them.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for what he is saying. Does he agree that, at some stage or other, these unsafe buildings were signed off as fit and proper buildings under building regulations and that leaseholders also have a valid claim against the individuals who signed them off, who are also insured?

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree with my hon. Friend and pay tribute to him for his work in this field. It is worth noting that building standards were set not by those who sign buildings off—the building control people—but by the Government or quasi-Government agencies, so the Government bear some responsibility as well, as I think they recognise.

In my thanks. I want to include Katherine O’Riordan, who has helped the secretariat of the all-party group and worked remarkably well. Given that my involvement as an active campaigner on this matter came through a constituency case, I pay tribute to my senior caseworker, Colette Hanson, who for many years—over a decade—has helped to support constituents facing awful problems, whether on this matter or others.

The Secretary of State referred to James Brokenshire, who carried forward many leasehold reforms. I also thank Sir Nigel Shadbolt and Sir Tim Berners-Lee and their Open Data Institute for providing help to LKP, the campaigning charity, in getting information that is publicly available and putting it together so that we could know the scale of the problem that we are facing. I pay tribute to the law commissioner Professor Nick Hopkins and his team for their 13th programme of law reform. I also pay tribute to Wendy Wilson at the House of Commons Library, who has since left, and Hannah Cromarty, who have produced briefings for Members of Parliament, which I commend to those outside this building. If they look at the House of Commons research and the LKP site, they will be as knowledgeable as me and will put across these points as effectively or more so.

Over and again I want to emphasise that people must respond to the Government’s very good consultation on ground rent. It is well-written and brings out the issues properly. I would be surprised if the dominant view were anything other than that ground rents should be reduced to peppercorns. At one stage, the Government suggested bringing it down to £10, but that still leaves most of the superstructure and the problems with leaseholders. It should be brought down to a peppercorn to eliminate those. When the consultation is analysed, I ask the Secretary of State to look with favour on reducing ground rents to zero. If I get any benefit, I will give it to a good cause, but I am not saying this for me.

I could go on at length, and at some stage I probably will. Having made my preliminary remarks, I want to say to the House that this is the opportunity, before a general election—whoever wins—to get legislation through that may be complicated in law but not in politics. Are we on the side of the people who have been at risk or exploited by interests who have owned freeholds? I have given my list of past shame, and I will not trouble the House with it now. If people have problems with their landlords or freeholders, they should tell their Member of Parliament so that they can bring it up in Committee or on Report.

I suggest that those who have used expensive lawyers to screw residential leaseholders use their money on something else. When a notable charity uses expensive lawyers to raise the cost of enfranchisement or lease extension by a third—an issue that should have come to Parliament rather than be done in the privacy of an upper property tribunal—we know that those running charities can get it wrong, too. We have left this too long. Let us now get on with it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

6.12 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Generally, I welcome what is in the Bill, as does the Select Committee, based on our 2019 inquiry. It is what is not in the Bill

[Mr Clive Betts]

that is disappointing—that is the difference. Let me go back to our report, which built on the work of the APPG—I congratulate the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who is now a shadow Minister, on their work. That report led to the work of the Competition and Markets Authority on mis-selling and the Law Commission report.

I want to go through some of the Select Committee's recommendations and what the Government have followed through on, which we welcome. I also want to look at the matters omitted from the legislation, which could easily be added in Committee if the Government want to. Leasehold flats are more complicated, and they will probably not be added to the Bill in Committee. The Select Committee accepts the complications, particularly where properties are part commercial, part residential. However, our report was four years ago, which is a long time for the Secretary of State to work up a scheme to deal with leasehold flats, but we are not there. In the meantime, I hope that he will commit to the Committee's recommendation for a programme of education and information for leaseholders, to ensure a better understanding of what commonhold is all about. There is a lack of understanding and information, and if we are to move to commonhold for new properties and encourage leaseholders in existing properties to convert, that programme is needed.

The legislation deals primarily with leasehold houses. We welcome the commitment to no new leasehold houses—or we will when the clauses are added to the Bill. We understand that that is for Committee. We welcome the commitment to removing onerous ground rents. The Select Committee looked in detail at the argument about the European convention on human rights.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill does not address issues associated with the growth in leasehold houses over the last few years? Earlier, I mentioned Persimmon, which has left a lot of residents with leases that include not only their own properties but common areas. Traditionally, when my hon. Friend and I were in local government, those would have been taken over by a local authority.

Mr Betts: There are real issues with that, which I was going to address later, but I will do so now. It is important to strengthen the right to manage, both for leaseholders and for freeholders in these estates who own the freehold of their house but not of the communal areas. I said earlier that in all property purchases where common areas remain in private ownership, there should be, at the point of purchase, a clear understanding of the agreement between the local authority and the developer about who is responsible for those common areas. In many circumstances it is simply opaque. Often, purchasers do not know who is responsible and are sent on a wild goose chase to find out once they have bought their property.

Returning to onerous ground rents, the Select Committee took counsel's opinion, which was quite interesting, and made recommendations in paragraphs 114 to 116 of our report. There were two clear arguments why removing

onerous ground rents from leases retrospectively was completely compatible with the European convention on human rights. The first, which most of us may not have thought about, is that controlling or changing rent is not confiscation of property but control of its use, so it does not conflict with the article on removing people's property rights. Secondly, the convention includes a justification where the proposal has a wider beneficial impact on society, which can be offset against any impact on the property owner. Counsel's opinion was that it was therefore perfectly justifiable under the European convention to remove onerous ground rents on existing properties.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): My hon. Friend will remember that when the Labour Government overturned the case of *Custins v. Hearts of Oak* in 1967, they used exactly those grounds to justify doing so.

Mr Betts: I do remember that far back. Many will not remember the Labour Government's '67 reforms, but they were quite important on those grounds—absolutely.

Other good aspects of the Bill include its reducing the price of enfranchisement and trying to make it simpler. Now, I am not sure that it makes it simpler; it is still a bit complicated. In the end, it partly depends on the capitalisation rates that the Government introduce, which will determine the price. But a lot of my constituents who are leaseholders live in houses, and they often face enormous barriers to carry through the enfranchisement process. I have referred to Coppen Estates in my constituency, which is notorious for simply not replying to letters. I once got it to reply to a recorded letter at the third time of asking. Normally, it ignores everything. That is just its way of trying to hang on to its ground rents and its income from leases. How will we deal with those sorts of individuals and companies, and the fact that they transfer ownership around from one company to another?

Why is there no right of first refusal for leaseholders in the Bill? I was pleased that, some years ago, Sheffield Council agreed that when it sold freeholds, the right of first refusal would go to the leaseholder. That would be a simple reform, and I hope the Secretary of State will consider it. The improvement of the enfranchisement process to make it simpler and reduce the cost is right, but I would like further improvements to ensure that it will work.

I welcome the standardisation of service charges. One big complaint to the Committee was that leaseholders often simply do not know what they are paying and why. They cannot work out which services are supposed to be provided and which are not. That is an important step forward.

On commission fees, we heard about the £150 to change a doorbell and the £3,000 to put up a conservatory—complete rip-offs. There is no justification for them in houses in particular, and very little justification in flats. I am pleased that freeholders will now have to provide a schedule of rates that will be charged. We called for a cap on rates, which might have taken reform a little further, but at least there now has to be clarity and transparency. I also welcome the clause that means leaseholders will not end up paying for the legal and other costs of freeholders where there is any conflict or dispute.

A number of other measures have been omitted from the Bill, but they could be included very easily. The Secretary of State mentioned forfeiture. If leasehold is a feudal tenure, then forfeiture is prehistoric—it really is. If a leaseholder in a very small way fails to comply with an element of their lease, they could have the property taken off them. That is just unacceptable and unjustifiable. The Secretary of State was right in what he said. Forfeiture is not necessarily something that gets used, but the threat of its being used puts the onus on leaseholders to “behave” or do what the freeholder wants them to do. The removal of that with a simple clause would be really welcome.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I should have included the hon. Gentleman and the Select Committee in my thanks, and I do so belatedly. On forfeiture, we could ban it completely, although there may be times when it is necessary to have an order to sell a property to pay debts. The limit should be raised from £350 to a significant figure such as £5,000, and any remaining equity should go back to the person who owned the lease and not be pocketed by the freeholder.

Mr Betts: The Father of the House makes a very reasonable point. My point is simply that forfeiture is currently a blanket possibility that can apply to any breach of a lease, however minor, and non-payment of a very small amount could cost the leaseholder the total of the value of their property. That is what we have to stop.

Why do freeholders not have to join a redress scheme? The Committee called for them to be included in the redress schemes. The Secretary of State is bringing in a number of redress schemes and ombudsmen extensions, so why can freeholders not be included?

One of the big issues raised with us, where again there is a lack of transparency, is that many leaseholders have to pay into a reserve fund—a sinking fund—for their property. Can we not have some protection for those funds formally written into law? Currently, many leaseholders have no idea what the money is being spent on. There is no obligation on the freeholder to explain it and certainly no protection that funds have to be used for the purpose for which they are paid.

On mis-selling, one of the big complaints we heard when we met leaseholders—this related to houses in particular; Persimmon Homes has been mentioned, but there were other developers too—was the fact that they were being sold a leasehold as though it was the same as a freehold. The solicitors were compliant in that, because they had been recommended by the developer. Often, a bonus was thrown in: “We’ll give you new carpets in the living room if you use that solicitor.” The Competition and Markets Authority investigated at our request and said there was mis-selling, but so far nothing has been done about it. The Government have done absolutely nothing to rectify that injustice. Can we not see something on that again? I do not think that there is any great conflict across the House, or between anyone who has been involved in this matter. It is wrong—absolutely wrong. Solicitors should not be induced in this way to provide conveyancing to a purchaser, when the developer is recommending that solicitor. It simply is not right and it needs addressing.

My final point is one that we raised on the private rented reforms that the Government will hopefully pursue—and hopefully this year coming, rather than waiting any longer with regard to section 21. We have called repeatedly for a housing court. I know the Secretary of State will explain again why he does not want to do that, but I think we ought to keep asking. There are so many issues in the housing field that need a specialism, and need quick decisions and quick resolution. A housing court would be one way of doing that and of trying to improve the process.

Stella Creasy: One thing I think so many leaseholders find frustrating with our current court system and the first-tier tribunals is that they do not set a precedent, so even if we identify something with a freeholder who may have multiple thousands of properties, every single individual has to go through the process if they were not a party to the original case. Does my hon. Friend agree that a specialist housing court could at least have precedent built in?

Mr Betts: That is an extremely good point. I do not think the Select Committee actually made that point, but it adds to its recommendations in a very thoughtful and helpful way.

There are a lot of issues, and I am sure we will not resolve all of them in today’s debate, but they need to be addressed in Committee. There are reforms to the proposed legislation that could be made, most of them quite easily. The bigger issue of leasehold flats is for another day, but it ought to be kept on the agenda. I welcome what is in the Bill, which could be the basis for a much-improved piece of legislation. Perhaps we will see an improved Bill come back to us on report.

6.25 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am delighted to speak on this flagship piece of legislation, which will restore true home ownership to millions, end rip-off charges and introduce fairness to the leasehold market. I am confident that it is a good piece of legislation not because I did all the preparatory work on it, but because I worked with brilliant officials, whom I thank.

We heard the testimony of so many thousands of leaseholders who struggled with blighted properties that led to blighted lives. There are too many of them to mention individually, but the strength and tenacity of the campaigners—and the organisations, such as the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and the Leasehold Advisory Service, under the leadership of the superb Martin Boyd, which helped them—is enormously impressive. Take, for example, Liam Spender, who was able to show that leaseholders in his block had paid £1.6 million in excess service charges to their freeholder, FirstPort. Incidentally, FirstPort is one of the worst offenders I heard about in my time as Minister. Yet freeholders still had the audacity to sit in front of me while I was a Minister and claim that

“some people like the security of paying service charges”

and that there is no evidence that they oppose ground rents. Yes, truly, that is what they said. Shockingly, I understand that Mr Spender and his tenants have received nothing yet, and now the freeholders are appealing the decision with the leaseholders’ own money. I would like the Minister to set out clearly how the Bill will tackle their situation and end that scandal once and for all.

[Rachel Maclean]

We got here because of the greed and unethical behaviour of predatory freeholders who have treated leasehold properties as a cash cow and the leaseholders as a milking machine to produce an endless stream of income for no work at all. It is the ultimate definition of rent-seeking behaviour. In its worst excesses, it is frankly disgusting. I and many others find it appalling.

Sir Peter Bottomley: On the case that Liam Spender has so rightly been pursuing for his fellow leaseholders, does my hon. Friend think it would be a good idea if the Select Committee considered inviting in the people he has been engaging with to ask why they did not put their hands up straightaway, settle and give back all the money they wrongly took from leaseholders, without having to have extended legal proceedings?

Rachel Maclean: That is an excellent suggestion from my hon. Friend the Father of the House, with which I strongly agree—as I do with everything he says about this issue.

Despite the theatrics we heard from the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who spoke for the Opposition, it is the Conservatives who are finally bringing in sweeping reforms. It is right that we note that Labour ducked the issue while they were in office. They could have fixed it then. They could have saved millions from misery—nearly 5 million homes, accounting for 20% of the entire housing market, are owned on a leasehold basis across the UK—but it appears they bowed to pressure from freeholders. We will never know why, but thankfully things will now change.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Lady may not remember—but I do—that before the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002 was passed, a great deal of pressure had been applied since 1999. At that stage, however, their lordships down at the other end of the building threatened to block all of Labour's legislation if we insisted on putting through some of the measures that were ultimately taken out of that Bill. The hon. Lady is right; those measures should have been included. I lobbied and campaigned for them to be included, and made my speech in the House accordingly, but their lordships were in the majority—and, at the time, 66% of their lordships had declared in the Register of Interests that they derived most of their income from the management of land.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Member for the history lesson but, regardless, we are determined to fix this now.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: No, because I need to make progress. Perhaps I will allow the right hon. Gentleman to intervene a little later.

The key factor here is choice. At present, leaseholders do not have a choice, or they have a fake choice. The Bill will give them a genuine choice when it comes to how they manage and own their homes. However, while I warmly welcome these measures, we can and must go further. May I draw the attention of the Secretary of State and the Minister to a few of my suggestions?

The measures in the Bill will clearly be of enormous benefit to individual leaseholders, making it easier and cheaper for them to buy freeholds or extend leases, but of course this is a very complicated area, and I know it will be difficult for many leaseholders to understand exactly how much they will benefit financially. My first suggestion, therefore, is the provision of an easy-to-use digital calculator enabling people to see what the Bill means for them.

Then there is the issue of commonhold fixes. I know that the focus here is on ensuring that leaseholders cannot be exploited and can take control of their homes, but there is a clear Conservative and free-market rationale for accepting the Law Commission's recommendations on reforming commonhold so that more developers choose it, rather than leasehold, for new blocks of flats—not because they are forced to do so, but because it is the best option for their business model. Can the Government look at that again? All the work has already been done.

I strongly welcome the Government's consultation on capping ground rents. As I said in an intervention earlier, the Secretary of State must look at who is making the representations, and bear in mind the old adage, "They would say that, wouldn't they?" when people oppose such caps. We know that ground rents are sheer exploitation. Let us call a spade a spade: this is money for nothing. Can the Minister assure me that there will be time to get a cap into the Bill once the consultation has closed?

We have all heard of too many sad cases involving a hard core of truly exploitative and dodgy freeholders—the bad apples—ripping off and exploiting leaseholders. We know that there are some freeholders who treat people properly, but the others know that going to court will be too much hassle for most people, and indeed that the odd tribunal defeat is just part of the cost of doing business. We must do something to ensure that there is a real cost to those unscrupulous companies and their directors.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for the work that she has been doing on this issue. However, she implies that the rip-off merchants constitute only a certain proportion of freeholders. Is she not aware that these people have been working in cahoots over the past 10 years, attending conferences, identifying the weaknesses in the law, sharing information and forming links with professionals such as agents and solicitors in order to rip off innocent leaseholders? This is a consistent, organised scam that has been growing over 10 years, which is why there are so many more problems now than there were, say, 15 or 20 years ago.

Rachel Maclean: Of course I am aware of that. When I was privileged to hold the position of Housing Minister, I strongly supported the relevant legislation, because those people sat in front of me and cried crocodile tears, telling me that if we went ahead with it we would destabilise the pensions industry and leave lots of little old ladies with no pensions—which is obviously complete and utter nonsense, as I am sure the Secretary of State and the current Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), will be able to tell me on the basis of the analysis that they have conducted.

We also need assurances about section 24 managers. I note that, in recent weeks, at least one freeholder has tried to wrest control of a building back from a court-appointed manager—a so-called section 24 manager—claiming that it is incompatible with the Building Safety Act 2022. That is obviously nonsense. If a freeholder has been found not to be managing his building properly, it shows some cheek to try to ditch a court appointee on such spurious grounds. I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity later to give us the Government's view.

I welcome the Government's intention of introducing building safety measures to ensure that remediation continues to accelerate, and to make it easier to ensure that the right people pay, but may I press the Minister for a little more detail? I know that, even as we speak, people are making serious decisions about their own finances.

My constituents in Brockhill, especially those in the Persimmon Homes development, have faced innumerable issues relating to freehold estates, and I must press the Minister on what measures he will introduce to help them and, most importantly, when he will do so. I know that the Government intend to introduce a right to manage for freeholders, and to challenge arrangements and charges through the first-tier property tribunal. However, I urge him to read again the *Hansard* report of the Westminster Hall debate in which I responded, on behalf of the Government, to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), who had told a story about one of his constituents who had had to pay thousands of pounds for one lamp post. This is an outrageous state of affairs, and I want the Government to introduce measures that will tackle it and many others. Currently, throughout the country, people's new dream homes are turning out to be a nightmare. They are being ripped off by small-print clauses that turn into big bills, and they have no redress. That must be fixed.

Finally, there is a need for regulation of the property management sector more broadly. I recognise that the Bill was not the right vehicle for it, but I urge the Minister to continue to push ahead with a reform that must happen, if not on this side of a general election, then on the other side.

We Conservatives believe that the opportunity to own one's home is sacrosanct, and the Bill takes another important stride towards the creation of a true property-owning democracy. While, as we have made clear, we stand firmly on the side of fairness and those who want to own a home, we are still none the wiser when it comes to where Labour Members stand. One week they are on the side of the builders, not the blockers—or so they say. The next week, they are blocking our proposals to build 100,000 new homes that first-time buyers and young families would desperately want to possess. While they decide whose side they are on, we are taking important steps to improve the lives of millions up and down the country. I look forward to working with Ministers on the Bill as it goes through the House to strengthen some of its measures, particularly those on commonhold and freehold estates, and to ensure that we deliver on the promise that it holds.

Let me end by wishing my hon. Friend the Minister better luck than I had in his tenure of this important role. I especially hope that he can remain to finish the

vital job of leasehold and freehold reform and restore true property ownership to millions. He will have my full support in the Lobbies.

6.38 pm

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), the former Housing Minister, and I congratulate her on her work in this regard. I was disappointed that she chose to adopt a rather partisan tone in some of her remarks—unnecessarily, I thought—but I was grateful for the more generous tone taken by the Secretary of State. I especially welcomed his generous and appropriate tribute to our former colleague, Jim Fitzpatrick, for his work in the all-party parliamentary group—I am glad that he was mentioned.

Let me begin by identifying a specific concern that the Bill has raised. I am aware of it because of the work that the Work and Pensions Committee has done on asbestos. Under the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, premises can be sold while containing asbestos; ownership can be transferred. Asbestos management is regulated in relation to workplaces, where it is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive, but not in domestic properties. In a lot of shared dwellings, such as flats and conversions, the landlord or freeholder has regulated duties under the existing regulations to manage asbestos in the shared areas in those developments. This legislation, as I understand it, may well give rise to the transfer of those obligations to domestic owners.

The existence and extent of asbestos in a building might not be known, leaving homeowners taking on these responsibilities with a hidden liability and, potentially, a life-threatening risk to handle as well. Homeowners are unlikely to have the wherewithal to manage asbestos in situ effectively, and this could leave a complex set of responsibilities and liabilities between owners in shared properties or where the nominal landlord no longer exists. At the moment, there is tax relief for businesses removing asbestos from a workplace—they can offset it against corporation tax—but there is no support for homeowners to remove or manage asbestos.

It has been suggested to me—this is something I am looking at—that there should be an amendment proposing that change in ownership of a property in the circumstances envisaged in the Bill, or a change in the extent of landlord control, should be a trigger for removing asbestos. Otherwise, more asbestos will move outside effective control under this legislation, meaning that nobody will be responsible for managing it and potentially creating a significant public health risk.

I will focus the rest of my remarks on part 3 of the Bill and draw attention to some particular instances that have arisen in my constituency. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), in opening the debate, rightly expressed the disappointment of many that the more radical ambitions for the Bill have been dropped, at least for the time being, but there are lots of practical problems for our constituents that need addressing and that the Bill can potentially help with.

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety, who is in his place, is aware of Barrier Point in my constituency, which comprises eight towers and 257 apartments. Tower 8, the largest of the towers, has

[Sir Stephen Timms]

50 apartments and a flammable cladding problem. In 2017, buildings insurance for the whole of Barrier Point cost £104,000. Last year, Aviva, which insured the block previously, refused to quote, so this year residents have ended up paying £443,547 for insurance, and Tower 8 residents have shouldered that huge increase at a cost of between £6,000 and £12,000 each. I am grateful both to Aviva and to Barratt, which built the development, for meeting residents to try to find a way forward. I am also grateful to the Minister for the interest he has shown in this and for his agreeing to visit—I hope we will have a date for that soon.

I can see that the Bill could go some way towards tackling those problems. I particularly welcome clauses 27, 28 and 29, which increase transparency around service charges and give occupants the right to obtain information about service charges and costs on request. Clauses 30, 34 and 35 will help tenants to enforce those rights and rebalance the costs of litigation in their favour. The Financial Conduct Authority's 2020 report on insurance for multi-occupancy buildings found that commission was often at least 30% on a transaction, and it found one case where it was over 60%. The FCA was worried that insurance commissions lacked transparency and it feared the conflict of interest that stemmed from brokers regularly sharing half their commission with the freeholder or managing agent. Replacing commission with transparent handling fees, as clauses 31 and 32 envisage, should certainly help.

Barry Gardiner: I appreciate everything that my right hon. Friend is saying. He will be aware, though, that many companies holding freeholds will also set up an arm's-length company that is the broker, thus taking a double take in terms of the commission. It is not just that they get cut from the broker; they are the broker.

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend makes an important point and I welcome his work in this area over a long period.

The changes in the Bill are not likely to do much to help the residents of Barrier Point who have exercised their right to manage. The FCA has argued that

“the intervention most likely to reduce prices for the minority of multi-occupancy buildings with the most substantial price increases would be cross-industry risk pooling”.

I was pleased to hear from the Secretary of State, in answer to my intervention, that he will be meeting representatives of the Association of British Insurers this week. The ABI initiative on this issue appears, up to now, to have stalled. The FCA recommended that the ABI should work with it and with the Government to introduce a risk pooling scheme in 2022. The scheme was expected to come forward last summer, but we are still waiting. I am hoping that, as a result of the meeting this week that the Secretary of State has told us about, things will get moving.

I checked with the FCA last week about this. It said that the ABI plan is

“credible and capable of delivering savings to those worst affected buildings”,

but it went on to add that the plan is delayed with “no firm launch date” because the ABI is struggling to secure “the reinsurance capacity required”. That seems

to be the obstacle. I very much hope that the Secretary of State can find a way to push this forward at his meeting. The ABI urged the Government to increase capacity by backing catastrophic losses in the scheme. It did that most recently in June. Can the Minister tell us whether that appeal has been considered by the Department and whether that might be taken forward at the meeting with the Secretary of State later this week? When does he think risk pooling will commence?

On remediation, there is a power imbalance between leaseholders and freeholders. That has been highlighted to me by Barrier Point residents. The Bill does not really address that. Section 72 of the Building Safety Act 2022 makes a right-to-manage company the “accountable person” for a high-risk multi-occupancy building, making the directors criminally liable if negligence can be proved. The same Act, however, requires only that freeholders “co-operate” with accountable persons, without any enforcement mechanism in place at all. The freeholder at Barrier Point has held up remediation works for several months and is refusing to sign off on them. The directors of the right-to-manage company desperately want to fulfil their legal obligations but they are left liable because of the refusal of the freeholder to say okay, and there is no comparable liability on the freeholder. That seems wrong, and I wonder whether that imbalance can be addressed in the course of the Bill's passage through the House.

The Minister said in oral questions just last week that the Government plan to make changes to the Bill as it goes through Parliament, and I hope he will consider how that imbalance can be addressed to ensure that remediation work can go ahead in a case such as that, which I suspect is by no means unique. The residents of Barrier Point want to purchase their freehold. To do so, they need to get at least 50% of all the leaseholders to agree to, and be able to afford, a freehold purchase. That is very difficult in a building with 257 households. I do not think the Bill does anything to make that process easier, so I very much hope that Ministers will be open to further improvements as it progresses through the House.

6.49 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): My speech will be brief, as I want to concentrate on one aspect of the Bill. Estate management companies are a massive and growing issue in my Dartford constituency. Some 7,000 new homes have been built in my constituency over the last 10 years, and they are predominantly “looked after” by management companies.

I welcome the measures in the Bill that will rightly allow residents to challenge the invoices and bills they are sent by management companies. This will help to transfer some of the power back to residents, by giving them a tool to say, “This invoice is unfair,” “This bill is not right,” or, “These accounts are not right.”

It is absolutely right that power is transferred away from management companies and into the hands of local residents, because at the moment management companies seem to do pretty much whatever they like. They can put up the charges they levy on residents way above inflation while providing a very poor service, and local residents can do very little about it. Local residents find themselves completely restricted in challenging what is, on occasion, a hideously poor service with extortionate fees. They are trodden on by the management companies.

Of course, residents question why they have to pay council tax at the same time as paying management fees, as they often find that their management fees are used to pay for, say, play parks that the whole community can use for free. They have to pay for it, they have to pay for the maintenance and they have to pay council tax, too, which seems very unfair.

In my experience, local residents want to be able to change their management company. They want to be able to switch over and to say to their management company, “No, you have not provided a good enough service. You are charging us too much money, and therefore we are going to use a different management company.” If that happens, it will help to tackle most of the problems we are experiencing with management companies. It will end the monopoly by returning competition to the system, enabling the good management companies to prevail and the poor ones to fall by the wayside.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The whole House will accept that my hon. Friend is rightly arguing for total transparency. There ought to be open-book accounting by these managing agents, so that those who are paying can see what is happening.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the amalgamation of managing agents is a dangerous trend? It means that the choice is reducing, not increasing. Given that some managing agents are very large and people’s experience of them is not very good, we ought to try to make sure that there is not this continual amalgamation and that there is a good choice of good managing agents that want to earn a better reputation.

Gareth Johnson: The Father of the House makes a very good point. I would like to see co-operation between companies, rather than amalgamation. In my constituency, we often see two management companies sending two people to mow the grass on the same estate. Residents look out of their window and see the grass on one side of the estate being mowed by one company and the grass on the other side of the estate being mowed by a different company. Of course, they have to pay twice for that pleasure. If the companies co-operated, that situation would not arise.

Some 20% of the people attending my surgeries are there to complain about management companies. Even a constituent of the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) came to my surgery—with two of my constituents, I hasten to add—to raise issues about management companies. She was very complimentary of the hon. Gentleman, by the way, but I put her straight. However, she was not very complimentary about the management company that she was suffering from. This problem happens in Greenwich, in Dartford and across the country, and we need this Bill to get to grips with it.

Mr Kevan Jones: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that management fees slowly go up in some retirement villages and retirement complexes? Older people do not challenge them, and it ends up making their flats either unsellable or worth less than they paid.

Gareth Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and it highlights how management fees undermine the whole housing sector. We will end up in

a situation where people do not want to buy nice homes because of the management companies that operate on these estates.

It undermines freehold, because people living on these estates have to go to the management company to get an information pack in order to sell their home. Of course, the information pack does not come free. On most estates in my constituency, people have to pay the management company £350 effectively to ask for permission to sell their house.

A lady contacted me and, apart from the cost, some of the information in her information pack was wrong. When she contacted the management company to ask some questions about the information it had provided, she was told that each question would be charged at £60 plus VAT, but this was the management company’s fault, not hers. That is just one example—I could give thousands—of just how horrifically some management companies behave. The Bill needs to deal with these organisations.

Barry Gardiner: The hon. Gentleman is making some excellent points. Is he aware that some companies managing residential properties for the elderly charge 10% of the property’s sale price, which they take to themselves for the privilege of allowing it to be sold?

Gareth Johnson: I have heard of those kinds of things. The same happens with park homes, and we are also trying to tackle that. It is only right that we tackle this issue with management companies, because it totally undermines the concept of freehold. The Secretary of State rightly says that he supports home ownership, yet we have a system that undermines the principle of home ownership.

People bought these houses in my constituency because they are nice homes in a nice area, and they often bought them in a seller’s market. They were literally standing in a queue, with other people waiting behind them to buy the same property. If they had not signed on the dotted line there and then, there were plenty of people behind them who would have. They signed without a full appreciation of the terms of the contract, which effectively said that the management company can put up its management fees way beyond inflation, and there is nothing that can be done about it.

I echo the Father of the House. As we consider the Bill throughout its passage, Members have to decide which side we are on. Are we on the side of the management companies, or are we on the side of local residents? It should be a no-brainer for every Member of the House, and I hope we will come together. After the Bill gets its Second Reading, I am sure we would all like to see some amendments in Committee.

6.58 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson). He is absolutely right about management companies needing more transparency and more accountability.

Today’s Second Reading of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill is long overdue for my Battersea constituents. Many are trapped in the exploitative leasehold system, which denies them control, safety, security and a future

[*Marsha De Cordova*]

in their home. Unfortunately, the Bill falls short of what the Secretary of State committed to when he said that the Government

“will maintain our commitment to abolish the...system of leasehold. We absolutely will.”—[*Official Report*, 30 January 2023; Vol. 727, c. 49.]

This is yet another broken promise by the Tories.

We all know that everyone deserves to live in a safe, decent and affordable home, and that means abolishing the unfair and outdated leasehold system. In London alone, leasehold accounts for more than 30% of homes. Some 74% of homes sold in Battersea in 2022 were leasehold transactions, making Battersea the 18th highest constituency in the country for leasehold. So this Bill really matters to the people of my constituency.

I have been in this House for only six and a half years, and we have debated leasehold reform continuously. Indeed, we have passed legislation, by way of the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022, which followed the awful, awful tragedy at Grenfell Tower. However, we know that even with all that legislation and despite all these debates, the system is still flawed and not all leaseholders are protected. In England and Wales, our approach has not been in keeping with that of the rest of the world, because many countries have chosen to do away with this feudal system or have reformed it; we are still in this state of stalemate. The Law Commission’s proposals back in 2020 had cross-party support. Everybody was in favour of them all, so it is disappointing that the Bill does not include all of its proposals and recommendations. That is sad because the Government have missed an opportunity to make some positive change that would protect our leaseholders. The Government’s inaction and delay in tackling the extortionate costs associated with being a leaseholder have had an impact, not least on people’s finances, as well as on their mental health and wellbeing. Many of my constituents regularly tell me about the range of problems they face: surging ground rents; high service charges; a lack of transparency over charges; poor customer service; excessive administration charges; charges for applications to extend lease agreements or enfranchise; and a lack of knowledge and information about their rights and obligations. The leaseholders in Battersea do not receive value for money on service charges, which can be increased at the last minute; they can go up drastically, with little warning. In one case, someone had their service charge increased by 30%, without any breakdown of costs or transparency as to why that had happened. At that time, the management company was—I am not sure of the best way to describe this—not forthcoming. In addition, it was abrasive, belittling and rude in its responses to us. So it is important that the role of these management companies and the way they are handled is addressed.

I am pleased that the Government are introducing long overdue measures to improve home ownership for many leaseholders. The Bill will make it cheaper and easier to extend a lease or buy the freehold; and it will increase the standard lease extension term from 90 years to 99 years, with the ground rent reduced to a peppercorn—obviously, upon payment of a premium. That is good and I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State said today that the Government will be consulting

on grounds rents. Sadly, he did not address my point about shared ownership and those who staircase to 100% and then become leaseholders, so I hope the Minister will clarify whether the consultation will seek to address that issue as well. We need more transparency on things such as service charges, and it is right that the Bill will provide that. It will also provide for a right to request information about those charges.

However, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and many others, despite multiple assurances from Ministers, the Government have U-turned on their commitment to end the leasehold system. After all that they had been promised, my constituents would have expected the Government to go further and end this outdated system. The Bill does not even contain provisions to ban the creation of new leasehold houses, as was promised in the King’s Speech. I understand that that will be brought forward in Committee, but why on earth was it not in the Bill today? There is never going to be enough time to really go into detail about the challenges with the Bill, but it is important to note that housing is a human right. Everybody should be able to live in a safe, decent, warm and affordable home. Homeowners should be able to have security and have the power of their own home, regardless of the type of tenure. If you buy your home, you expect it to be yours; you do not expect there to be a freeholder who owns this aspect of it. The Government could take some lessons from Labour, as we will protect leaseholders through making commonhold the default tenure for all new properties and by overhauling the system so that existing leaseholders can collectively purchase more easily and move to commonhold if that is their wish. We are also committed to supporting house building, in order to deal with the housing crisis that the Tories have created and not addressed. That is why we need this leadership on housing; we do not need any more broken promises and failed policies from this Government, which have really left this country in a mess.

7.5 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). Let me start by paying tribute to the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who has been campaigning on this issue for many years, to great success, eventually. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is no longer in her place, for all the work she has done in the preparation of this Bill. I welcome the principle of the Bill. Some Opposition Members may say it is too timid, but with 58 pages of detailed legislation and equations, which remind me of my time studying physics and maths at university, it can hardly be said to be less than complex. The key issue is: have the Government gone far enough in what they intended to do?

Our manifesto commitment was clear: to promote fairness and transparency for leaseholders, and ensure that consumers are protected from abuse and poor service. Clearly, that is a fundamental requirement. The Law Commission’s 2017 review of leasehold law represented it, and it is has taken us six years to get to this point in dealing with some of the abuses. We have to remember that 94% of people who have bought leasehold properties regret buying them and 70% of leaseholders are worried

that they will not be able to sell their homes because they are leasehold. That is one fundamental thing we need to answer. We also need this leasehold reform to reform and support the housing market, because almost half of leaseholders are first-time buyers and 28% are under 35. At a time when fewer and fewer people are buying their first home at such an age, it is vital that we not only encourage people to buy their first home, but simplify the system.

So I welcome the overarching aims of the Bill to modernise this complex system, but clearly there is still a lot of work to do. Obviously, making it cheaper and easier for existing leaseholders in houses and flats to extend their lease and buy their freehold is a key point. The so-called “marriage rates” make it almost impossible for leaseholders to buy properties with fewer than 80 years left on the lease and to extend that lease to 990 years, which is what we are now going to be looking at. Having that as the standard position for houses and flats has to be the right thing to do. We should remember that the original position on extensions was 90 years for flats and 50 years for houses, so we are introducing a massive change and it is extremely welcome.

Barry Gardiner: I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way; if he is fortunate at the next election, he may inherit some more leasehold flats. As he will know, in this country a freeholder holds their freehold for a period of 999 years from the Crown and that may run out before any new leasehold is able to conclude its 999 years. Does he understand what the Government propose to do in that situation?

Bob Blackman: Longevity may run in my family, but not to the extent of 1,000 years. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point and I am sure the Minister will seek to answer it in his summing up.

Introducing new rights for long leaseholders to buy out the ground rent without needing to extend the term of the lease is another extremely welcome move, as is removing the requirement for a new leaseholder to have owned their house for two years before they can benefit from the changes. The new right to require the freeholder to take a leaseback of non-participating units when a collective enfranchisement claim is made is also vital. We do not want to get to a position where people are deterred from enfranchisement because they cannot take on those who do not take on enfranchisement.

A new costs regime for enfranchisement and right-to-manage claims so that each party bears their own costs is vital. Far too often, the freeholder has sought to obtain their costs from the purchaser, which is clearly unfair and unjust. Moving jurisdiction for enfranchisement and right-to-manage disputes to the first tier tribunal and the leasehold valuation tribunal in Wales makes it much easier for parties to identify how they can bring about a dispute. I note the point the Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), raised when he said that freeholders often make it as difficult as possible for enfranchisement to take place.

The issue of transparency of service charges is vital. One of the benefits of serving on a Select Committee for a long time is being able to remember the reports the Committee was involved in, and I well remember an

inquiry into this issue. We wanted all service charges to be transparent and fixed to the cost of providing that service, as opposed to a figure plucked out of the air and then passed on to the person supposedly receiving the service. It is welcome to see that the Bill contains measures for minimum key financial and non-financial information to be supplied to those receiving the service on a regular basis, including through a standardised service charge and an annual report. That means leaseholders can scrutinise and better challenge costs if they are unreasonable.

Equally, replacing buildings insurance commissions for managing agents, landlords and freeholders with transparent administration fees stops leaseholders from being charged exorbitant, opaque commissions on top of their premiums, an issue that has already been raised in the debate. I welcome scrapping the presumption for leaseholders to pay their freeholders’ legal costs, which in my opinion is outrageous, as well as granting freehold owners on private and mixed-tenure estates the same rights of redress as leaseholders, by extending their equivalent rights to transparency over their estate charges and to challenge the charges they pay by taking a case to a tribunal.

All these measures are welcome, but there are many other areas where we need to go further. The promise to do away with leasehold—or fleecehold—completely was clear in the manifesto; in my view, that promise should be honoured, particularly on the sale of new-build flats. In London, they are now the most common property type; almost all flats are sold on leasehold basis, compared to just 6% of houses.

On the individual building firms, we have heard about Persimmon, but we should also remember Bellway, whose chief executive came in front of our Select Committee and told us—I repeat what they said almost word for word—that it was the company’s policy not to offer the freehold to leaseholders at the first opportunity. Instead, six months after building the properties and selling the leaseholds, it would transfer them to a finance company, which would go through the detail of all the charges it could make and then really leverage up those charges, and the finance company would refuse to allow the leaseholder to even consider buying the freehold. That was the policy of that company. I think Permission admitted that that was its policy too, and other building companies do exactly the same. That is a scandal and it should be stopped, and we should legislate for that.

Clearly, we all want to see the promotion of commonhold. However, as the Chairman of the Committee said, we need more education for individuals, so they understand not only their rights but the responsibilities they would take on with commonhold.

One concern that has been raised with me on several occasions is about what will happen, once this welcome Bill is on the statute book—we look forward to the amendments that are made—to existing leaseholders who bought their leaseholds in good faith but are not being dealt with properly or effectively. We need to ensure that squeezing out the bad practices of freeholders and managing agents, which are unfair to individuals, is part and parcel of the legislation.

There is also the issue of conveyancing. Most people who buy their first property pay the minimum legal costs they can get away with. As a result, they often are

[Bob Blackman]

not given proper advice about the consequences of their decisions. We need to ensure that individuals are given the opportunity to understand the responsibilities they are taking on and, more importantly, what will happen to them in the future if there are service charges involved.

Local authorities hold a huge number of properties under lease conditions and, if they want to sell the freehold to leaseholders, they are often among the worst sets of people to deal with across the country. I agree that a leaseholder should have the right of first refusal if a freehold is being offered. Will my hon. Friend the Minister give a commitment that, after we have engaged in consultations on service charges, the results of those consultations will be reflected in Committee so that we can strengthen the Bill?

Finally, I want to refer to a particular building in a constituency that neighbours mine. It has 13 floors and still has the old, Grenfell-style cladding. We all know the tragedy of Grenfell, but the owners of the building are refusing point blank to remove the cladding unless and until they are given planning permission to build on top of the building, so that they can sell more property to pay for the cost of remediating the cladding. The self-same company, Ballymore, although it has yet to submit a planning application, wants to build 29 blocks of flats, the tallest of which will be 29 storeys and the majority of which will be more than 20 storeys, at a density greater than Manhattan, Singapore or any other place in the world. That is a scandal. When the Secretary of State named certain building companies, he promised that if they refused to carry out the work that they should do, they would not be given planning permission to enable the development of more leasehold flats. I call on him to ensure that they are not given planning permission until such time as they are putting right what they have put wrong.

I pay tribute to all those who have fought for so long and so hard to achieve this limited reform. I will support the Bill, and I look forward to us taking forward further measures so that we can end the feudal system of leasehold once and for all.

7.20 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I have mentioned before that Liberals have been campaigning to end leasehold since the days of Lloyd George, so I am pleased to see this piece of legislation finally being debated in the dying days of this Parliament. I hope that there is the time left to pass it and see meaningful change for the many leaseholders—leaseholds comprise 20% of the housing stock in England—who are boxed in by exorbitant management charges and uncapped ground rents.

The content of the Bill is welcome, and the Liberal Democrats will not oppose it on Second Reading, but, like other Members, we have significant concerns about the omissions from it. First, the Bill does not actually ban leasehold. Perhaps more importantly, it does not ban the creation of new leasehold flats. I do not grasp the logic of arguing that leasehold is outdated and unsuitable for the modern housing market, while allowing 70%—the vast majority—of leasehold arrangements to go ahead.

The Liberal Democrats support the comments made recently in *The Guardian* by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), that

“commonhold should be the new default tenure”

for all flats, and that it should be easier for leaseholders to collectively purchase their freehold should they wish. I also agree with several other Members that giving leaseholders first refusal when the freehold is sold is a good idea. It seems to me that without those more radical measures, the Bill is less leasehold reform and more leasehold tinkering.

I think that we all agree with the Secretary of State that this is a feudal system that needs radical overhaul, and I am not sure why the Bill does not go further to achieve that. I have been lobbied, and I have some sympathy for the argument that there is a need to ensure that there is a clear line of responsibility, and indeed liability, for building maintenance and safety in large blocks of flats, but most other countries—in fact, all countries other than Australia—have managed to achieve that without reliance on the leasehold model. Indeed, our recent experience regarding the safety of large blocks of flats, with the cladding scandal, suggests that in many instances the leasehold model has demonstrably failed to provide it. We probably all agree on that point.

I am also confused about why the Bill omits to introduce professionalisation in the management of leasehold buildings. The British Property Federation has said that

“the lack of any provision to introduce competency standards or regulation to our sector is a missed opportunity.”

Given the experience of many leaseholders over the cladding scandal, and the welcome professionalisation of the social housing sector, I hope that the Government recognise the importance of ensuring that management is professionalised and will seek to introduce such measures in Committee. I wonder whether the Minister would commit to that in his closing remarks.

In my North Shropshire constituency we do not have a large number of flats, but we have been plagued to some extent by new housing developments in which the housing is freehold but shared areas, services and essential infrastructure are managed by the original developer. As we all know, those are referred to as fleecholds, and since being elected I have told a number of horror stories regarding such arrangements, both in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall. The provisions in the Bill that allow the right to challenge charges, provide for greater transparency of information, and relate to the quality of work and an associated system of civil penalties, are a welcome step in the right direction, but I wonder whether I could push the Government to go further in that area.

The tenants of such developments pay both their council tax and an estate management charge, yet they often receive a far worse service than those who live in adopted developments and are subject only to council tax. The hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) laid out some of the issues in his excellent speech, so I will not go into too much detail, but I urge the Minister to consider ending the practice of shared ownership of public spaces for the vast majority of new developments. They have the commercial substance of a leasehold, and I would like to see a presumption that the shared

areas around new developments are almost always adopted by the local authority where the development is standard in nature. Where there is no good reason for that not to happen, homeowners on those developments should have their rights clearly set out so that the matter can be settled quickly in court.

I ask the Minister to consider further the specific circumstances where assets such as sewage pumping equipment or a ground source heat pump are shared by everyone on the estate. I am grateful to him for listening to my concerns prior to the debate. Freeholders using such equipment are dependent on its being installed and maintained to a high standard, but the experience of my constituents is that conveyancing solicitors do not alert buyers to the risks involved in this type of structure, and that the ownership structure can be opaque and almost impossible to challenge. I have one development in which the developer retained the ground source heat pump to be used by the rest of the houses in a separate company. He charges the full cost of running that pump to the residents but keeps the renewable heat incentive payments to himself, making a huge profit in the process. The freeholders' only route of redress is through the courts. Because of the opaque management structure, it is not clear that they will win, and they do not really have the resources to commit to those legal proceedings.

It is not uncommon in rural places such as North Shropshire for a new development to use a shared septic tank rather than be connected to the mains sewer. If the tank has been installed to a poor standard, the costs of rectification are charged to the freeholders once they move in. Those are costs that they would not have anticipated when they bought the property. I would welcome greater clarity over who is responsible for ensuring that such shared assets are fit for purpose before the freehold houses are sold for habitation. Currently, such assets and services are outside the building control regime. That means that if someone gets a completion certificate on their house, which might have been properly constructed, but their sewage system is not fit for purpose, they will still have a valid building control certificate, and will be none the wiser when they buy the property.

I ask the Minister to consider whether further protections can be put in place, such as ensuring that inspections of those assets are included as part of the building control sign-off, ensuring that reserve funds are being collected and appropriately ringfenced through reasonable service charges throughout the life of such assets, and allowing freeholders to take joint ownership of the assets for a nominal fee if they wish to do so. A right to manage would be so welcome for residents trapped in such situations.

Will the Minister also expand on the issue of enforcement? The additional rights afforded to leaseholders and those paying estate management charges will be effective only if there is an affordable way for leaseholders and freeholders to ensure that they can be enforced. We all have experience of freeholders simply failing to respond to correspondence, or requiring their tenants to take them to court in a highly unaffordable process, often charging the costs of that court process to leaseholders. Enforcement is therefore not really achievable at the moment, but it is so important to ensure that those revenue streams are effectively squeezed for freeholders.

The Bill is a small step in the right direction, but so much more could be done to end this outdated form of tenure. It was 1909 when Lloyd George described leasehold as “not business, but blackmail”. It is high time that we grasped the nettle and ended it.

7.28 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): There is much to welcome in the Bill. It is all too easy to believe that leasehold affects only London and the larger cities across the country, but that is not so. In the past 30 to 40 years in particular, many more properties have been built on a leasehold basis. Many leaseholders are now facing the dilemma of whether to extend. It is estimated that there are 4.98 million leasehold properties, equating to 20% of the housing stock. That includes properties in my constituency, and I have raised the matter in the House previously. I also have a personal interest as a leaseholder. Many years before coming to this place, I had the unpleasant experience of extending our own lease. The Government made good progress with the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022, which limited ground rents to a peppercorn on all new leases. The Bill that we are considering today does not include the same limitation to protect existing leaseholders from onerous and potentially very expensive ground rents. Without that, up to 4.98 million homeowners will be left saddled with unfair ground rents.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, said that “liberating leaseholders forms a vital part of the government’s long-term plan for housing.”

We cannot have a situation in which we are liberating future leaseholders while leaving existing homeowners trapped. This is an urgent problem. The Government’s own consultation in 2017 identified it as a trend leaving leaseholders facing significant and unsustainable increases in ground rents, which often affects the saleability of their homes, so I hope it will be addressed.

On new leasehold houses, I welcome the Government’s commitment to ending the creation of new leasehold houses. It is time we moved on from what other hon. Members have also described as an archaic system that holds homeowners back. However, I was concerned that measures to do that have not appeared in the Bill as drafted. My understanding is that the Government intend to bring forward amendments for that purpose, but I would also like an assurance from my hon. Friend the Minister at the Dispatch Box that that will be the case.

I am also concerned that new leasehold houses may still be permitted under exceptional circumstances. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to tell me exactly what those circumstances cover, and to assure me that safeguards will also be put in place. We need to ensure that that exception is used sparingly, if at all, and does not become a loophole for developers who simply wish to push more leaseholds in through the back door.

Turning to the extension of existing leases or the acquisition of freeholds, an important and necessary part of the proposed changes will be the extension of the lease, with a new standard 990-year lease with zero ground rent. The removal of the marriage value from the premium calculation is also welcome and much needed, and potentially represents a fair and equitable change for leaseholders. As you may recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker,

[Wendy Morton]

I raised my concerns in the debate on the King's Speech that those reforms are long overdue. I am disappointed that they have come forward so late in this Parliament, especially when we promised reform as far back as February 2017.

I for one would not want to see current leaseholders, who have no choice but to renegotiate their current leases now, unfairly left out in the cold by our legislating so late in this Parliament. I therefore ask the Minister to consider a sunset clause in the Bill, to allow anyone who has had to negotiate since the start of the current Parliament to be afforded a right of passage under the reforms to extend their lease to the new standard.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is no longer in her place, I would welcome the introduction of an online calculator for calculating the cost of an extension. I believe that would make the process simpler and more streamlined for those who are seeking to extend their lease or acquire the freehold. However, it must also be quick and inexpensive for leaseholders to calculate and find out the cost of an extension, because currently that is not the case. Put simply, the current system of using archaic graphs is another way to set the system against the leaseholder—and, sadly, too much of the current system is weighted in favour of the freeholder. That is why this legislation is so badly needed.

The change to ensure that legal costs be shared, as opposed to the current system whereby the leaseholder bears all the costs, is also welcome. We also need to end the weighting of independent arbitration through the Tribunals Service in favour of the freeholder. In considering this Bill, we have the opportunity to shape legislation and create a level playing field for both parties.

On commonhold we also need to do more. Reform would give the leaseholders of flats the right to acquire and manage the common parts of the building. That is potentially a welcome change, provided that protections against the abuse of service charges are in place. However, when it comes to disputes, there is a clear need to revamp the tribunal system. It does not fulfil what it was set out to achieve. The tribunal system was created to strengthen the rights of long leaseholders, and to provide a cheaper and quicker way to resolve disputes, yet in reality it is the antithesis of that.

Leaseholders often avoid the tribunal system altogether, due to fear of becoming liable for the freeholder's tribunal costs, and regrettably there are many cases where freeholder landlords recruit high-powered barristers and simply pass their fees on to the leaseholders, regardless of whether they win or lose. It is also fair to say that that leads to leaseholders worrying that they will be unable adequately to defend their position on, for example, raising a dispute over unreasonable administration charges. That needs to change. We need a renewed and refreshed tribunal system that empowers and protects leaseholders.

There are additional things that we can also do to see improvements now for those with leaseholds. The right to manage is an important part of our toolkit, and I welcome measures in the Bill to improve that process. The current claims process is complex, and leaseholders can find their attempts frustrated by rogue freeholders who block them from exercising their rights. I would like to see more of the Law Commission's recommendations

implemented, particularly where we can make the process cheaper and less complicated to implement. Let us be bold and include more measures to help our homeowners to take back control.

There is also a strong need for a new regulatory model for managing agents. Under the current system, anyone can become a managing agent, regardless of experience. Unfortunately, many leaseholders report countless problems with their agent, from high service charges to lack of transparency or exclusion from decision making. Of course, there are some managing agents who perform well and choose to sign up to standards of practice, but there are many who do not. This, for me, is a clear case of a moral hazard. It must be addressed, and we have the opportunity to do so through this Bill.

I am pleased that the Government have committed to regulating managing agents through a single, mandatory and legally enforceable code of practice. Managing agents will be required to have a nationally recognised qualification to practice, which will be overseen by an independent regulator. By requiring them to adhere to minimum standards through a professional body, we can expect to see higher levels of professional conduct among all managing agents.

Finally, I want to mention housing associations. I would hope to see under this new legislation a requirement for greater transparency on service charges and the replacement of building insurance commissions for managing agents or landlords, with transparent administration fees, to benefit leaseholders who have exercised their right to buy within the social housing sector and those within the leasehold retirement bracket. Recently, I have come across numerous examples in my own constituency where leaseholders in those sectors have been left with unexplainable and unjustifiable bills—something that this legislation must stamp out.

To conclude, we have an opportunity with this Bill to get rid of archaic processes and systems, to renew and refresh the legislation on leasehold and to create a level playing field. There is much to welcome, but I still believe there is more that we can do through this legislation.

7.38 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak on the Second Reading of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill and to follow so many excellent contributions from Members across the House. They have all provided examples, most of which I have experienced in my eight and a half years in this place.

For years and years, leaseholders, campaigners and groups such as the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership have been warning the Government about the huge harm being done by our outdated, feudal and antique leasehold system. Many of us have raised it in this House. Problems with leaseholds is one of the biggest issues brought to me by constituents, and I am sure if the Minister joined me in meeting residents of just one or two blocks in my constituency, whether it was Great West Quarter in Brentford, Grove House in Isleworth or Wheatstone House in Chiswick, he would see the wide array of problems caused by the leasehold system.

We have had nearly four years of promises from successive Conservative Housing Ministers and Secretaries of State to commit definitely to leasehold reform. The Government have talked a good game but failed to

deliver the big comprehensive package of reforms needed. This piece of legislation is yet another example of that failure.

This was supposed to be the grand reforming Bill from the grand reforming Secretary of State, who is not currently in his place. He has become the Conservatives' Mr Fix-It. He was sent in to fix the justice system and then the Cabinet Office, and even to deliver the parting blow to the former Prime Minister. When he was presented with the leasehold system, there was a glimmer of hope that the Government would slay the vested interests and finally fix this antique system—but no, the right hon. Member has flinched. He has failed, because before us today we see a timid and narrow Bill that does not go anywhere near far enough to fix the problems faced by leaseholders.

Most new homes in my constituency are flats, not houses, so although ending the sale of leasehold houses is welcome overall, it will not help my constituents and the millions across the country who are still living in, or face the prospect of living in, leasehold flats. If the House will indulge me, I will give a typical example of why the leasehold system is outdated and just what the legislation should be addressing.

Imagine someone in their early 30s on the career ladder in a reasonably well-paid job. They have saved up for years, often while stuck in private rentals. They finally have enough for a mortgage, and they can just about afford the monthly repayment rates. They look across west London and cannot afford to buy a house, but they then see a glossy advert for a flat. At first glance, it looks perfect. They have worked out that they can get a mortgage and use their deposit to get a foot on the ladder. It looks as if their salary can pay the mortgage and the service charge, so they buy and assume that they have a stake in the home that they now own.

Too often, they are kept in the dark by solicitors who are often recommended by developers. They move in and the problems start. They notice a few problems: the promised concierge might not be there; the gym on the brochure never opens; rubbish is left in the hallways; the car park barrier and the door from the car park into the flats are often broken, creating a security hazard; and heating and hot water stop working for weeks on end. They report those issues, but nothing happens. Then, they get their service charge bill in the post: it has increased to more than £7,000 a year, over 50% more than what they were told they would be spending.

One constituent has seen a trebling of their service charge since they bought their flat in 2017, but while the service charge goes up, the services get worse. Leaseholders feel that they are treated like cash cows. Then they are hit with an increase in their building insurance: what was £200 a year is now £400, £500 or more. They ask why those costs have gone up, but they do not receive a specific or clear answer. Many are faced with having to sell, sometimes at a loss.

If they were lured into shared ownership, managed by housing associations, they face additional problems. The part-buy/part-rent set-up is supposed to be targeted at keyworkers in the public sector, many of whom are on fixed pay. On top of the mortgage and service charges, those so-called owners—they are not really owners, are they?—find out that their rent is going up. In many cases, my constituents in shared ownership have seen rent increases of 6%, 7% or 8%. They only own 20% or

25%, and if they need to sell, they have to sell through their housing association, unless they are in the fortunate position of being able to step up and own the lease outright. A report that I read said that many housing associations drag their feet on resales as there is not much money to make from them. They focus their energy on getting the new blocks sold.

I have heard from many constituents who are shared owners. They wait months and months to sell, and have to pay for costly valuations, while they are trapped in limbo trying to get on with their lives. Many of my constituents who are leaseholders are also unable to sell because they are waiting for remediation work to begin on blocks deemed to be unsafe. Much of that emerged following the tragedy at Grenfell. Banks will still not approve mortgages for those blocks until the work is carried out, which means that, again, those leaseholders are trapped in limbo.

In one case in my constituency, Galliard Homes has delayed and delayed taking any action, despite promises that it would start months ago. Leaseholders in blocks below 12 metres are still responsible for funding building safety fixes. They were carved out and left to deal with the crisis themselves. For one of my constituents, that means a £20,000 bill hanging over their head. The building safety crisis is a wider symptom of the building culture that the leasehold system encouraged; a system in which a small number of people and companies are able to make huge profits, with absolutely zero oversight of the build quality.

Let me move on to repairs. The residents of Wheatstone House in Chiswick, which is managed by L&Q, face an example of poor repairs services. Leaseholders and tenants in that block have known their hot water and heating not to work for days on end. That started last winter and is back again this winter. Each time, residents get a lacklustre and slow response from L&Q. We saw a repeat of such poor service when Peabody-Catalyst dragged its feet for months in fixing the lift at Aplin Way in Isleworth, trapping some residents upstairs. The developer then tried to leave leaseholders with a huge bill. Others have district heating systems that run at 35% efficiency but cost a lot of money. What does the legislation do to address those issues?

On service charges, management companies have their cake and eat it. The hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), who is no longer in his place, mentioned the excess charges, increases well above inflation, deteriorating service and opaque bills. Management companies are often too closely aligned by ownership with the freeholders. The same names keep coming up: Rendall & Rittner and FirstPort appear to be hoovering up the management contracts for a range of blocks, including housing association, shared ownership and resident management companies, all the while providing an appalling service to the leaseholders.

On declining value and the need to extend leases, constituents have told me about how they worry about their future if they have less than 80 years left on their lease. I do not think that the Bill does enough to address that challenge.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) has said that a Labour Government would go further and ensure that everyone who wanted to move from leasehold to commonhold would be able to do so. A Labour

[Ruth Cadbury]

Government will make commonhold the default tenure for all new properties, and will carry out the Law Commission's recommendations—I welcome that. Labour will also address the omission on deferment rates. We will do what the Conservatives have failed to do.

I have touched on only some of the many and varied issues that my leaseholder constituents have faced. The legislation does not go far enough for them and will not fix the problems that they face. It will not help those who are stuck in limbo and unable to sell, it will not help those who were tricked into shared ownership with false promises, and it will not prevent yet more leaseholders from having their lives turned upside down. When someone is handed their first set of keys, it should be a day of dreams, but for so many of my constituents and millions of people across the country, that dream has turned into a nightmare. The Government had a chance to end that nightmare through this piece of legislation, but they have failed to do so.

7.47 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Leaseholders at 8 Artillery Row pay on average £2,000 in service charges each month. The managing agent, Avon Ground Rents Ltd, refuses to disclose what is included in those charges and to provide invoices. One of the charges was £30,000 for legal and professional fees, requested without explanation or detail, even though leaseholders asked—reasonably—for information for over two years.

Leaseholders in Neville House in Westminster are living in a cladding nightmare. Although Westminster City Council issued a hazard awareness notice on the building, no remedial works have been undertaken because the managing agent, Estates & Management Ltd, has failed to agree with the developers, Berkeley Homes, on the terms of a survey licence. As a result, the homes are unsellable.

The leaseholders of Blake Tower on the Barbican estate are living in a building with ongoing fire safety issues. The developer, Redrow, committed to dealing with those issues but has yet to undertake the necessary inspections. The tower also has building defects so serious that they have resulted in several flats being unliveable. The local authority, the City of London Corporation, shares my concerns and those of my constituents, and I understand that it is about to take action.

Those are just a few examples of the appalling behaviour of freeholders in my constituency. I have been contacted by countless leaseholders who routinely report appalling practices related to service charges, the cost of major works and the extortionate charges they face when renewing their leases. When they request information or explanation, they often face a wall of silence from freeholders and their agents. "Extortionate" is probably the correct word, as what some freeholders and their accomplices—including managing agents, lawyers and accountants—are involved in is often little better than extortion. Those freeholders should instead be described as freeloaders.

The Bill responds to the concerns raised by so many of my constituents. For example, clause 27 aims to make service charges more transparent, ending the practice of demanding unexplained service charges that too

many freeholders engage in, often just to profit off leaseholders. The introduction of a standardised form for freeholders requesting service charges from their leaseholders is certainly welcome, but I would like more detail about what information will need to be disclosed and how much warning freeholders will have to give leaseholders regarding costs.

Too many of my leaseholder constituents have told me that they choose not to take their landlords to tribunal, as they could be liable for their huge legal fees even if they win. I therefore welcome clause 34, which responds to that concern by ensuring that leaseholders will no longer be liable for those costs. I also welcome the fact that the Bill overhauls previous legislation by increasing the standard lease extension term for houses and flats to 990 years, as well as reducing ground rent to a peppercorn upon payment of a premium. That will ensure that leaseholders can enjoy secure, ground-rent-free ownership of their own property without the hassle and expense of repeated lease extensions.

Another game changer in the Bill is the commitment to removing marriage value. For far too long, when leaseholders want to extend their leases, they have been at the mercy of their freeholder and that freeholder's agents, and have faced some questionable practices. The Bill makes it cheaper and easier for leaseholders to extend their lease or buy their freehold. It removes the requirement to pay marriage value, capping the treatment of ground rents at 0.1% of the freehold value in the calculation and prescribing rates for that calculation.

Clause 22 will increase the non-residential limit of a block from 25% to 50% when it comes to securing the right to manage and enfranchisement, meaning that more blocks that are a mix of residential and commercial property will have the right to manage and buy their freehold. However, that still requires 50% of the leaseholders in a block to agree to go ahead with the right to manage, which could prove near impossible for many of my constituents, due to the unique nature of the Cities of London and Westminster. Over 1,300 properties in the City of London, and a staggering 12,100 in Westminster, have owners who live abroad or are owned by companies using central London's golden postcodes as a place to park their cash. As such, while my constituents and I warmly welcome the Government's intention to support leaseholders who want to manage their blocks, it will prove difficult in my constituency to achieve the 50% of signatories required.

If the proposed legislation is to achieve what the Government hope for constituencies such as mine, I ask them to consider making the thresholds more flexible—perhaps by stating that 50% of signatories should be leaseholders of apartments that are their main home, rather than an investment, or reducing the threshold for the right to manage to 35% of leaseholders. I would welcome further discussions with the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), on that point. I thank him for meeting me and my leasehold reform working group, made up of constituents who are dealing with some of the most egregious freeholders in my constituency. The 50% threshold was discussed in some detail with the Minister at that meeting.

Another area of huge concern for leaseholders is the cost of major works and estate management charges. I have lost count of the number of constituents who have

contacted me for help regarding those issues: for example, leaseholders living on the Golden Lane estate in the City are being asked to pay tens of thousands of pounds extra because the freeholder, the City of London Corporation, is 20 years behind schedule. In Russell House and Churchill Gardens, which are both in Pimlico, residents are failing to secure details on timings and costs from Westminster City Council.

Time and again, I receive complaints from constituents living in private and social blocks that, while they appreciate that they have to pay for major works and repairs, they want the freeholder—whether it is a private company or a local authority—to be open and transparent about costs. I therefore welcome clause 40 of the Bill, which will provide more transparency about major work costs. Similar to service charge expenses, landlords will have to fill out a standardised form to demonstrate exactly how the leaseholders' money will be spent and ensure that the works are carried out to a certain standard.

I take this opportunity to thank Harry Scoffin, the founder of Free Leaseholders, for his incredible work. His support and technical knowledge has been invaluable to me and my constituents when considering the Bill. I welcome the Bill, and look forward to working with the Minister and my constituents to ensure that we end the many questionable practices of some freeholders and ensure that the leasehold and freehold system in this country is open, transparent and fair.

7.56 pm

Samantha Dixon (City of Chester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate—it has been fascinating to hear from Members from around the Chamber. I pay tribute to the dedicated campaigners, including the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and the National Leasehold Campaign, for their hard work up to this point. They have campaigned tirelessly for justice in the broken leasehold system, and for the Government to live up to their own manifesto promise and bring this Bill before the House. I am sure they will continue to campaign.

It is estimated that there are 4.86 million leasehold homes in England. That is 4.86 million households stuck in a system that denies people power, control or even a say over the security, safety and future of their own home. As we have seen, this is a cross-party issue: Members from across the House have been expressing the concerns of their constituents for many years, long before I arrived in this place a year ago. This Bill is an opportunity to rebalance the scales in favour of leaseholders, but the question remains: will it actually do so? Unfortunately, I and many others feel disappointed by the limited state of the Bill before us.

It is often said that an empty vessel makes the loudest noise. We have heard a lot of noise, which may reveal the reality that this Bill is somewhat hollow. Not only does it not ensure that new flats will be sold as freehold, contrary to what Ministers have claimed; it does not even do what it says on the tin and ban the sale of new leasehold houses, as the Government originally promised, because it contains no provisions to end leaseholds on newly built houses in England and Wales. I understand that that ban is going to be brought in in Committee, but it was first promised in December 2017 by the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid). Originally, the Government claimed to have run out of time to put

it into the Bill, but they have been planning it for six years. They repeatedly comment on how complicated leasehold law is, yet they cannot include that one simple provision in the Bill. In reality, it is leaseholders who are exasperated.

Indeed, it appears that the Government have dropped quite a lot of the Law Commission's recommendations. They claim that the Bill will make it easier, cheaper and quicker to buy the freehold or extend the lease on a property, but how do we know that without knowing what the prescribed rates will be? Thousands of leaseholders have been waiting for this Bill to arrive, and in the meantime they remain in a state of leasehold limbo, trapped by this iniquitous system. Many are unable to sell and move on with their lives. They are being forced into a game of poker in which the stakes could not be higher. Do leaseholders stick, and wait to buy their freehold or extend their lease—in itself, an appreciating asset—in the hope that Government promises to make it cheaper actually materialise, or do they twist, and pay these faceless offshore investment companies thousands of pounds? I do not know the answer, and I am not too sure the Government do either. Professional valuers and leasehold solicitors are struggling to advise their clients, too. Without knowing what the prescribed rates are going to be when calculating these figures, the claim that this legislation will make it cheaper to buy is unsubstantiated.

Also missing from the Bill is the regulation of property agents. The single biggest rip-off in the leasehold system is service charges, and without robust regulation of this, it will continue and leaseholders will remain at the mercy of bad managing agents. On the Opposition Benches, we are committed to implementing the recommendations of Lord Best's working group, which were published by the Government four long years ago and on which they have sat. The Government have yet another consultation, which leaseholders are busy completing as we speak, on reducing current ground rents for existing leaseholders. As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has pointed out, it is not quite clear what the relationship is between this Bill and that consultation, but perhaps the Minister will expand on that.

After so many years of unfulfilled promises, the Government appear to have yet again failed to deliver for our constituents. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has said, a Labour Government will make commonhold the default tenure for all new properties, as part of our commitment to reform the leasehold system fundamentally and comprehensively, by enacting in full the Law Commission's recommendations on enfranchisement, commonhold and the right to manage. I am glad to see this Bill in front of us, but from listening to this debate, it is still clear that there remains a great deal of work ahead before these fine ambitions become a reality. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that we need a Labour Government to truly deliver for the so many people stuck in this feudal system.

8.2 pm

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to be speaking on the Second Reading of this Bill, which sees long-term changes to improve home ownership for leaseholders and freeholders alike. As many people have said, the Bill is much needed, and I am glad it is

[*Duncan Baker*]

finally here. It is also a pleasure to be speaking on behalf of a constituent of mine, who does not wish to be named, but who, through the numerous conversations I have had with her over the years, has enlightened me about the significant difficulties and obstacles that many leaseholders face.

These difficulties include, but are not limited to, high service and administration fees, disproportionate costs when wanting to extend leases, managing agents displaying poor practice and, in particular, imbalances in the dispute mechanism. Most of these my constituent has had to deal with personally, and they have impacted on her in numerous ways and led to a long, hard battle that she is still fighting. I can only imagine the stress and concerns that this brings to many families, and many of these points have been raised already this evening. It is through these conversations that I know how many leaseholders feel insecure and uneasy about owning a home with the sector as it currently stands. Leaseholders are a residential sector that makes up 20%—almost 5 million properties—of the housing stock in England. As such, it is important that we strike a balance between the rights of the tenants and those of the landlords, while ensuring that there are more powers and protections for those owning a home.

The Government have committed to not only increasing housing supply, but ensuring that more people feel protected and secure when looking to rent or own their own home. That is a problem I do not need to mention in this House yet again, given the pressures of living in an idyllic coastal area such as North Norfolk, which has some of the highest numbers of second homes and holiday accommodation in the UK. I similarly welcomed the Renters (Reform) Bill for tenants and landlords, and it is encouraging to see that extended to leasehold and freehold as well.

However, as others in the Chamber have said, the Bill does not go far enough in the eyes of many. It can be incredibly tiring, financially taxing and stressful for leaseholders, especially when trying to extend their lease or challenge poor practice. The Bill is trying to make it cheaper and easier for leaseholders in houses and flats to extend their lease and buy the freehold, improve transparency and rebalance the legal costs regime, as well as removing barriers for leaseholders to challenge their landlords' unreasonable charges at a tribunal.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for what he is saying. I know the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill is for England and Wales, but it seems that there are many good things in it that, even if the Bill does not go far enough, are to be welcomed. May I, through the hon. Gentleman, ask the Minister, on the finalisation of the Bill, to share information about it with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Northern Ireland Department for Communities in particular, to ensure that we can take advantage of the good things in the Bill back home?

Duncan Baker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and I think he is right. There are many good things in the Bill, but it does need to go further. I will come on to some of the issues in a moment, but the particular items on which we need to go further are

those raised directly by my constituent, who has written to me about this for the last couple of years. It is welcome that the Bill is here, but I already understand that it will be amended, which will be important as it goes forward.

As I have said, I am aware that the Government are planning amendments to take the Bill further. I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that we should give ample time to consult on those amendments, particularly—for me and my constituent—those in respect of the first-tier tribunal system to ensure that all barriers are removed for leaseholders challenging their landlords. We also need to take time to discuss the benefits of bolstering commonholds to ensure that leaseholders who own flats have the same protections and freedoms as those who live in houses. There needs to be better regulation of managing agents—that has been mentioned already—and, as a basic requirement, the first-tier tribunal system needs the jurisdiction to enforce its own orders. Without strengthening the Bill on that in particular, there will not be a significant impact on my constituent.

We have said all along that the Bill has cross-party support, which is really positive in this place. As I have said before, it is positive to see the Government are taking a leading step to help ensure that leaseholders are better protected. It is opening up further opportunities for people to own their own homes, but I hope it does go further so that I can support my constituent and we can really deliver the radical changes we need.

8.7 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): May I begin by echoing the comments of those on both Front Benches in supporting all those who, for many years, have been working on leasehold reform? As we have seen from this debate, this cuts across the Benches, because it is a classic example of the reality that we see in our constituency surgeries day in and day out. I also pay tribute to the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform for all the work it has done. I know that I have benefited from reading much of its material while trying—often in vain, frankly—to help constituents with freehold manager companies.

As we head into the festive period, I know that this would be the best possible Christmas present we could give to so many people who are struggling with the impact of what I call “leasemin”—the day-to-day admin or work they have to do to manage the fact that they have a leasehold property. In my constituency, like that of so many other hon. Members, thousands of people are in that position. It is not just about the costs of renewing a lease; it is the day-to-day problems that come from being in a leasehold block.

Given that it is the festive period and we all want to give people good news at this time of the year, I have to tell the Minister that it does feel a bit as though my constituents have seen Santa's sleigh flying past with all the lovely presents, but all they are getting is a lump of coal because so many of them are in flats that will not be affected by this legislation. May I urge him to think about what more we could do to protect those people in flats, because there has been an explosion of this, particularly in cities and in areas such as mine?

Sadly, I am told this evening that Condé Nast has described part of my constituency as one of the new hot places. I always dread it when I see that because it means

a lot more building, a lot more pressure on house prices and very little support for my local residents. So many of the people who move into those properties will be moving into leasehold properties and face these problems; they will face that basic nightmare of thinking they own their home when they really do not. It is theirs but only under certain conditions; it is not their castle to do what they want with. Those conditions can be about whether they can have pets or a loft extension. During the pandemic, many residents could not access the energy-saving proposals because that had to be done at leaseholder level and their leasehold managers were not doing anything about it.

There have been good freehold companies as well as bad ones; there is variation. But the fundamental challenge at the heart of this legislation, and why I asked the Secretary of State about it earlier, is that commonhold is the only way we can genuinely give voice to people. It is a voice that deals with the “leasemin” problem—much more so than having the most efficient freehold management companies possible. So I want to stress to the Minister that there is still time to put commonhold as the default tenure into this legislation, and give people the Christmas present they really deserve—the most proper protection against being exploited that we could offer.

Let me give the Minister some context for why I feel so strongly about this. The number of flats in my community has risen 13% in the last eight years while the numbers of other types of properties have remained broadly static. Frankly, every time Kirstie and Phil turn up in Walthamstow, we see another tower block go up, and those tower blocks are leasehold; more than half the property transactions last year were for leasehold properties.

This is a massive issue now for most local residents, fundamentally changing the nature of my community both in terms of the people who can afford to live in those properties and the impact this is having on the cost of living. It is no surprise to me that I have the ninth highest level of child poverty when I look at people who have bought what they think are great starter homes but then find themselves saddled with charges and costs that they cannot afford in order to try to stay in the area. The question for me is whether this legislation will address the challenges that they are facing, and I do not see that happening. However, I do want to acknowledge there are many things in the legislation that we all welcome, such as the shift to peppercorn rents and ending escalating ground rents, which for some of my constituents has been a massive challenge, and the idea of longer default leases.

Many people in my constituency are part of a group of leaseholders because they live in properties that were built en masse. That is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, I want to talk about the Warner estate in Walthamstow. They are beautiful properties, and I declare that I used to live in one myself. They were built from the 1930s to house the workers for our local industrial estates in the Lea valley. They were purpose-built flats built in two-storey terraced rows with a double front door and a split back garden. On a practical basis, that means that both residents in the properties have to want to buy the freehold, which creates a barrier for people and a challenge for so many of my constituents.

More fundamentally, the frustration I see is that, although thousands of residents live in these properties, every single one of them has a different interaction with

the freehold manager. That is partly because in 2002 a situation happened which this legislation would not deal with. The Warner estate was sold and split up between Circle 33, Final Brief and various other commercial freeholders. The Minister might say that the residents would have had the right of first refusal, but because the leasehold companies were sold within parent companies and child companies of each other, residents did not get a look in. Therefore, local residents who organised themselves into Warner estate residents groups have had to deal with different companies even though they live side-by-side, complicating their ability to exercise what few rights they have under existing legislation. That means that there are different prices for renewal of the same length of leases, and different prices for quotes for having an extension and the paperwork needed for that. The most egregious difference is in the insurance they were all charged. In fact, many years ago they were asked to take on terrorism insurance for living in these properties. When I queried that with the freehold company, I was sent back the details of somebody who had been accused of terrorism and lived in Walthamstow; therefore, those who wanted to continue to live in the Warner properties as leaseholders needed to pay that additional premium. That is all perfectly legal and at the moment in this legislation there is no way to challenge that when a freeholder “takes the mickey”—I was trying to find a polite parliamentary term.

I guess my leaseholders on the Warner estate are at least grateful that they do not have a lease for Bridge Court, which is under—I am sure the Minister will know the name of this management company—Y&Y Management.

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley) *indicated assent.*

Stella Creasy: As the Minister is nodding, he will know the amount of casework that small set of properties, only 24 flats, has generated for me over the years. To give some examples of the charges residents have faced, one was given an extra £1,500 bill and another was due to be evicted for being spuriously charged £5,000 by that company. It is not legally possible for those residents to withhold those payments and not lose their properties, so they had to try to find the money to pay, even though it was patently obvious that that egregious company was levying the charges as punishment for their having dared to exercise their rights. The only option open to them was to go to court.

Again, this legislation offers nothing to help support people in such a situation. It offers nothing to help support people when their freehold manager shifts the leasehold around to avoid them having the right to manage or even the right to buy their own freehold out. This company decided the private communal gardens could be turned into a public car park, opening up the entire estate and letting in huge problems with antisocial behaviour, all because it thought it could make a fast buck in the London area with a car park.

Y&Y then transferred the ownership of the building to Triplerose, a management company owned by Israel Moskovitz, who is part of Y&Y Management. Just the other week a resident came to me to point out that they had an onerous ground rent clause, which means that their ground rent has to be reviewed every five years

[Stella Creasy]

against the retail price rate. That was not in the original lease but was added in. The owners of that property tried to sell the flat, and they asked whether they could vary that condition, because it was stopping them being able to sell it. Triplerose responded, demanding an immediate non-refundable payment to provide a quote—just a quote—for what it would cost to vary that condition. It then came back with a quote of £700 for an admin fee, £1,400 for legal fees and £8,000 for the premium.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): I have some casework that sounds similar to that which the hon. Lady is describing. It is at Pebble Beach in Seaton. A constituent wrote to say that she wanted to change the name on the deeds and introduce her partner's name, and FirstPort wanted to charge her £540 just to get its approval. Does the hon. Lady agree that some of the leasehold companies we are talking about are charging Fortnum & Mason prices for services we might associate with Trotters Independent Traders?

Stella Creasy: I think even Del Boy had limits compared with some of the people we are talking about.

The Minister would probably say that in those circumstances the changes being made to ground rent should resolve the situation, and he would be right, but my broader point is that those residents have no redress. At the moment, the Bill does not come with forms of redress, and without redress it does not matter what rights people have because they cannot action them.

Those residents actually did go to a first-tier tribunal. They clubbed together, took on the risk and won—and understandably so, because if someone turns the private gardens into a car park, allowing people into the block, that does rather undermine the concept of service charges. They have been waiting three years for the compensation they are entitled to as a result of that ruling. Again, nothing in the Bill would change that. But that they went to a tribunal with a company with such a track record for doing these things over and over again, and that it meant nothing for future legislation and had no preventive effect, is perhaps the biggest and most important message Ministers should take from this debate. The fact that people cannot set precedent by winning a leasehold tribunal means that residents who live in blocks that are very similar go through the same fights again and again, and the same companies know they can get away with it again and again.

In any other legal situation there would be court precedent and opportunities for redress for our constituents. Surely, one of the things that we can do through the Bill is to change that and learn from other courts, because that “leasemin” is so time-consuming and stressful to so many of these people, and that is why they end up at our doorstep. Nobody wants to take on the risk of legal action if they can avoid it, especially if they have no guarantee that, even though the situation is patently unfair and somebody else has won a very similar case, that will make a difference.

We see it every single day. We see the people with repairs. I think of Hainault Court in my constituency, which has a freeholder of various names, including Freshwater, Highdorn and Daejan—it uses different ones all the time—where residents have spent hours of

their lives trying to get the basic repairs that they pay their service charge for. They were charged £10,000 to replace a collapsed boundary wall. They got their own estimates, and it should have cost only £2,000 or £3,000. In a community where everybody is short of cash at the end of the month and every single penny counts, knowing that they have no alternative is a very poor place to be.

I wish I could say that situation is just in the private sector, but my own council was taken to court successfully by leaseholders over the charges being proposed for repairs and renovations in some of our local estates. Again, I hope that the Minister thinks about the right to manage, which is difficult to do in a block with a mix of social housing and leasehold property. In London, there are an awful lot of those properties, thanks to right to buy.

I also think of those people stuck with nothing to put any impetus on their property managers to do the right thing, even though they recognise that they need to do the right thing. I think of Hoffmans Road in my constituency, which is in that patch that Condé Nast is telling everybody to visit right now. The residents have no security on their building, because the doors do not work. The property company, Fexco, tells me that it is a problem for the developer, Taylor Wimpey. Taylor Wimpey, however, thinks it is for the property manager to use the money from the service charge to fix it. Nothing in this legislation will give those residents—my constituents—the ability to just get it sorted in the way that commonhold would.

We all have hundreds of examples. One thing that I have learned in this place over 13 years is that when we get these precious opportunities—when there is cross-party agreement that reform needs to happen—we should aim for the big reform, because we might not get the opportunity ever again. Nobody in this Chamber can defend freehold. Nobody can defend leasehold. We can all see the value in having a system that allows our constituents to have a direct voice. Goodness knows, I am sure for many of us it would cut the amount of casework we have, if nothing else. It would be a lot clearer what redress our residents have, before they have to go to court in the first place.

If we cannot have courts making precedent-setting rulings, can we at least look at how we can give our residents a stronger voice? For so many of them, it is the difference between a life well lived and a life lived in stress, wishing that they had never even bought the thing that they dreamed of, fought for and saved for longest of all. I had a cladding developer that said that it had put itself out of business so that it did not have to do the cladding; it was too small to be liable for it. Those residents are still waiting for redress.

All those issues tell us that this is not about a big-P political issue; it is about the day-to-day practical implementation. If we get this legislation right, we can solve so many headaches for so many people. I hope the Minister will not be Scrooge. I hope he will not be the Grinch. I hope he will think about what he can do for all those people sitting in those flats tonight, looking at the lump of coal that this legislation represents for them. Will he extend the Christmas cheer not just to those who might have been threatened by leasehold for houses, but to all those in leasehold flats right now? I know it would give everybody a very good 2024 if he did.

8.23 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It has been a privilege to sit here for five hours and listen to all the passionate contributions from all parts of the House, with a pretty unanimous view. First, I thank Cath Williams, Katie Kendrick and Barry Kushner for their help in my constituency with the many leaseholder issues that I have had. For millions of people, the housing sector is broken. Everywhere within it we see a huge imbalance of power, and that has had a devastating impact on the health and wellbeing of thousands of my constituents in Liverpool, West Derby, and so many people across the country, as we have heard today. That injustice is encapsulated by the frankly medieval ownership framework, which creates a clear imbalance of power between leaseholder and freeholder. The scandal of leasehold must be brought to an end for the millions who have bought their home but do not feel like they own it.

While I welcome the promise of some of the reforms in this long-overdue Bill, many of which came from the Select Committee on which I serve, I am extremely disappointed that it does not directly tackle ground rents. I suspect that the Government know exactly what existing leaseholders urgently require from them on ground rents, so I am dismayed that rather than addressing that matter directly, they have decided to consult on it. The vested interests have definitely won again.

Practically every constituent I have heard from on this matter—and there have been many—tells me that they want ground rents abolished so that they can be guaranteed secure, ground rent-free ownership of their property for years to come, without the stress and expense of repeated lease extensions. I note that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) agrees. He spoke eloquently about it today, and he said last week that ground rents on leasehold properties needed to be

“peppercorn or zero, it’s as simple as that.”

My constituents also want to see a Bill that contains all the Law Commission’s proposals, rather than the watered-down version before us today. I am glad that our Front Bench team confirmed that that is what we will do if we get into government.

I am also dismayed that the Government have not gone so far as to abolish new leaseholds on flats. That is a huge mistake. Can the Minister give a reason why flats, which make up 70% of leasehold properties, will continue to be sold as leasehold, when he was elected on a specific manifesto promise to end that practice? The Government had the opportunity in this Bill to put a stop to what the Secretary of State himself recently called the outdated “feudal system” of leasehold. Instead, they appear content for new flats to continue to be bought and sold as leasehold. That is incredibly disappointing for so many people across the country.

If Ministers are serious about doing away with leasehold, they need to ban leasehold on all new flats, as well as new houses. Let us be clear: the only argument for retaining leasehold on flats is to allow management agencies and freeholders to continue to exploit leaseholders for the purpose of profit over principle, with the status quo prevailing. That has not been the mood music from those on the Government Front Bench, but talk is cheap in this place, as I have found out.

Until leasehold is banned, homeowners will continue to be held hostage in their own homes. Given the current economic situation, the delays and lack of clarity on a timetable for overdue reform are increasingly frustrating for my constituents. It is unacceptable that they continue to be subjected to extortionate, unjustified charges and escalating ground rents. What is more, I am convinced that the leasehold system is not only unfair, but a genuine health and safety risk, as has been outlined today, when we consider the continued delays to the vital fire safety recommendations made by the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire.

The National Leasehold Campaign has welcomed this long-overdue legislation, but considers several key items to be missing from the Bill, and I completely agree. Those measures include, but are not limited to: prescribed capitalisation and deferment rates for valuers to value lease extensions or freehold purchases; abolishing forfeiture, which is used against leaseholders and serves as a massive windfall for freeholders; an online calculator for lease extension and freehold purchase; steps to progress the adoption of commonhold; the regulation of managing agents, as we have heard about today; and making it easier for leaseholders to have the right to manage.

If the Government are truly serious about ending the nightmare for leaseholders, they need to urgently revisit this legislation. I suggest that they meet the National Leasehold Campaign and the Law Commission to ensure that the key recommendations by both bodies are included in the Bill as it moves forward.

8.27 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I start by declaring an interest: my wife is the joint chief executive of the Law Commission, whose work I intend to cite in my remarks.

It is a pleasure to close this Second Reading debate for the Opposition, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in it. I echo what so many others have said and add my own tribute to all the individuals and organisations who have campaigned for so long for reform in this area.

As a number of contributors to the debate have pointed out, we have waited a long time for this Bill. It was just under six years ago that the then Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), announced that the Government intended to introduce a series of measures to end unfair and abusive practices within the leasehold system, including—I quote here from a Government press release in December 2017—

“legislating to prevent the sale of new build leasehold houses”.

That 2017 announcement was developed three years later, during the tenure of the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) as Secretary of State. In a written ministerial statement dated 11 January 2021, he announced

“seminal two-part legislation to implement leasehold and commonhold reforms in this Parliament”.

The first part of that two-part legislative agenda duly followed, in the form of the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022. Although we—and in particular the shadow Minister for homelessness and building safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury)—pressed Ministers to use that Act to

[Matthew Pennycook]

implement further reform, we nonetheless supported the Government in passing it. In the 17 months since the Act came into force, successive Ministers have made all manner of extravagant promises about what the second part of the “seminal two-part legislation” would entail. Indeed, the current Secretary of State, in an interview with *The Sunday Times* in January this year, even went so far as to declare, without qualification, that he intended to abolish the leasehold system in its entirety.

Leaseholders across the country, whose daily lives are often made miserable by the unjust and discriminatory practices that our archaic leasehold system facilitates, took Tory Ministers at their word. They expected the second part of the promised two-part legislative agenda to live up to the weighty promises made by the Government. They have been badly let down. Having waited so long and had their expectations raised so high, they are understandably disappointed at the limited Bill that we are considering today. And it is a limited Bill, and no amount of bravado from the Secretary of State can alter that fact. They are also perplexed, as we are, that legislation that the Government claimed would end leaseholds on newly built houses in England and Wales does not actually contain any provision to end such leaseholds.

When the Minister responds to the debate, he will no doubt attempt to brush that criticism aside, as he did in oral questions last week, on the grounds that it is entirely normal for key provisions of a Bill to be added in Committee. Sadly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) mentioned in opening the debate, it is common practice for this Government, and this Secretary of State in particular, to significantly expand the size and scope of Bills by incorporating swathes of Government amendments in Committee and on Report in a way that limits the ability of hon. Members to ensure that full scrutiny takes place. However, the Minister is fooling no one in attempting to suggest that the omission from the legislation of key provisions was always the Government’s intent.

I remind the House, as my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon) did, that the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove committed the Government to legislating to prevent the sale of new build leasehold houses nearly six years ago. The Government have no excuse whatsoever for failing to include in the Bill the provisions necessary to enact that commitment in order for the House to consider them properly today. That they failed to do so no doubt owes more to hurried drafting, and to the wrangling between the Department and No. 10 that has taken place over recent months in respect of this Bill, than to any considered design. However, for all the confusion that surrounded it, the legislation before us has answered one important question: how ambitious do the Government wish to be when it comes to leasehold reform? Because this unambitious piece of legislation makes it clear that proponents of caution and restraint have won out over those who want to lay claim to a legacy of bold reform in this area.

That criticism cannot simply be brushed aside as carping on the part of the Opposition. The Government’s poverty of ambition has real implications for leaseholders being routinely gouged by freeholders under the present system. Take flats, which are the overwhelming majority

of new leasehold properties being created and the source of most of the leasehold-related complaints that I receive from constituents. The Government’s stated solution for them, as made clear by Baroness Penn in the other place just last week, is reinvigorating commonhold, yet the Minister of State made it clear on Monday that the Government do not intend to incorporate into this Bill any provisions whatsoever relating to commonhold, despite the clear commitment they made in 2021. Instead, it remains part of their “long-term approach”. In other words, the Government’s offer to swathes of leaseholders across the country is jam tomorrow.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), known affectionately as No. 15 on these Benches, gave the game away. She said that all the work has already been done on commonhold, so it is not a matter of complexity; it is a political choice on the Government’s part not to introduce commonhold provisions in this legislation. What is so galling about the position that Ministers have adopted is that there is clearly widespread support across the House for the more ambitious leasehold reform that could have been incorporated into the Bill, and this debate has demonstrated it. However, in the dying days of this Government, we are where we are.

While we deeply regret the Bill’s lack of ambition, we have no intention of voting against Second Reading this evening. We support the intent of the provisions in the legislation before us and the principle of the Bill as a whole. The measures it contains will give homeowners in England and Wales some greater rights, powers and protections over their homes. That is not to say that we do not have concerns about the efficacy of some of them; we do, and we will seek to strengthen the Bill in a number of ways in Committee. For example, we believe that clauses 12 and 13, which are intended to protect leaseholders from covering the legal and valuation costs associated with lease extensions, require tightening if we are to prevent, in practice, freeholders recovering litigation and non-litigation costs. To take another example, we believe that clause 23, which seeks to replace the existing costs regime for right to manage claims, is flawed and needs overhauling if it is to protect, in practice, RTM companies from cost claims by landlords.

We also believe that this limited Bill can be improved in ways that will give future leaseholders more control over their future. For example, we think there is an iron-clad case for adding to the Bill provisions that would abolish forfeiture for leases entirely and replace it with a more equitable means for freeholders to recover costs in a dispute that does not involve a windfall. I was pleased by the signal that the Secretary of State gave on that front in opening the debate. To take another example, we think there is merit in adding to the Bill provisions that would ensure that leases on new flats include a requirement to establish and operate a residents’ management company responsible for all service charge matters and associated works, with each leaseholder given a share.

We will seek to convince the Government of the merits of those and other measures when we go into Committee in the new year, and we will engage constructively with the Government if they decide to introduce other bold measures into the Bill at that stage—for example, if Ministers are minded to implement the Law Commission’s proposals on the right to manage, covering both flats and houses.

However, we recognise that there is only so much that we can do with the legislation before us. Given the paucity of the Bill's ambition and the fact that it does not contain so many of the commitments that successive Secretaries of State have made, not least in relation to the promised widespread introduction of the commonhold tenure, it is clear that it will now fall to a Labour Government to fundamentally and comprehensively reform the leasehold system, including the reinvigoration of commonhold to such an extent that it will become the default and ultimately render leasehold obsolete.

We are pleased that the Bill will progress today. It will provide some limited relief to leaseholders. We will seek to improve it with a view to extracting from the Government any extra measures that further empower leaseholders and disturb the historical iniquity on which the present system rests. Leaseholders across the country who remain at the mercy of arcane and discriminatory practices, to their detriment and to the benefit of freeholders, rightly expect nothing less. But leaseholders across the country expected so much more from the Government. We are clear that, in due course, Labour will have to finish the job and enact all the Law Commission's recommendations on enfranchisement, right to manage and commonhold in full. We are determined to do so.

8.37 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate after so many useful, thoughtful and detailed contributions. In that spirit, I want to spend a little time going through some of those details. Before doing so, I wish to thank, as so many others have, all the campaigners and all those who have spent so much time working in this area for so many years.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson), the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken), the hon. Member for City of Chester (Samantha Dixon), my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), and all those who intervened for the helpful comments they provided.

I welcome the general and broad support for the actions that are being taken in the Bill. I also welcome the consensus in the House on the need for reform, which I know, as was highlighted several times, has been some time coming. I hope right hon. and hon. Members will recognise that this is a complicated and intricate area, which is observable not least from the many examples given in the debate. We now have in front of us a good proposition for making progress.

Our focus in the Bill is on being able to make practical progress—to make the Bill as practically useful as it can be—and then to have the greatest impact that it can have.

Some, including hon. Members tonight, have said that it does not go far enough; others have said that we should return to first principles and seek to build the whole system again. I am sure that those hon. Members will make their case in Committee if they are part of it, and on Report and in subsequent stages. The Government seek to have a proposition on which can be built; one that is practical, achievable and makes a difference. The art of politics is about being able to make progress, and we think that the Bill will make a significant difference to people's lives.

Let me turn to some comments made in the debate. I pay tribute to the long-standing work of the Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West. He raised a number of points, which we will go through in more detail in Committee, but I want to highlight his point on building safety with regard to sub-11 metre properties. A number of Members made similar comments. We have a process in place, so if colleagues have concerns about fire remediation issues in sub-11 metre properties, they should ensure that they get the appropriate fire assessments needed in all buildings. If substantial works are needed to those properties, they can be raised with the Department, which has committed at this Dispatch Box and has executed commitments to look into those issues in more detail.

I pay tribute to the work of the Select Committee, chaired by my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East. I particularly enjoy our interactions on this issue because it gives me, like him, the opportunity repeatedly to say as a constituency MP how outraged I am about Coppen Estates's consistent failure to respond. That is a hallmark of a small cohort of actors in this area, which consistently and flagrantly ignore reality and their ability to make a difference to our residents' lives. Coppen Estates is a good example of such actors, but there are many others.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for responding to that point. Will he look at strengthening the Bill to stop companies like Coppen Estates avoiding the legislation? Strengthening the legislation is fine, and so is changing the way that enfranchisement fees are calculated so that people get a better deal, but in the end, the freeholder has to respond, which Coppen Estates refuses to do. My constituents in the Flockton estate in Sheffield have tried and failed for years to get a response. How will the legislation be strengthened to ensure that such companies respond?

Lee Rowley: I am very happy to look at specific issues in Committee. As the Secretary of State highlighted in his opening speech, if there are areas where we can improve the Bill, we will be happy to do so. I cannot make promises, but we are happy to look at them. The hon. Gentleman's constituents in Sheffield, my constituents in Dronfield and constituents all across the country have similar issues to those with Coppen Estates, so I hope we will be able to make progress.

The hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Battersea and others rightly talked about leaseholders not knowing what they are paying for. A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of taking part in a two-hour discussion with one of the better estate managers about an issue in my constituency in Hunloke Grove. They were willing to go into detail, talk about the issues, work through and be

[Lee Rowley]

transparent on their fees in a way that so many other managing agents are not. The importance of that came home to me in that discussion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch should rightly take all the credit for where we are today. I am surfing on all her work over many months to get the Bill ready. She deserves a huge amount of credit for that. She was an exceptional Housing Minister and has made some extremely constructive comments today, which we will look at along with the similar comments from my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk. I can confirm that our intention is that there will be sufficient time to be clear on ground rents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch rightly said, it is so important that we secure a property-owning democracy for the next generation.

I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham for making a series of important points, which I am happy to look at. The Government are happy to see whether they are possible. He made a specific point about asbestos, which we will take away and review with the detail it deserves. I look forward to the visit to Barrier Point, which I wanted to make following his correspondence. It is important that, on building safety, we look at not just the overall macro picture but individual circumstances, to see whether we can learn anything.

I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for giving me this opportunity to make the point about insurance from the Dispatch Box. I am as keen as him to see progress on insurance. I have met representatives of the insurance sector on a very regular basis in the year that I have been in post. I hope that they will hold to their intentions. They have told us that they will launch the scheme, and we are keen to see it. The Secretary of State's further meeting this week will, I hope, enable progress.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford made extremely important points on estate management. He has continually articulated the challenges on a regular basis, and has been a champion on this matter. He rightly speaks of the outrages he has seen in his constituency. It is important that we respond to that as best we can.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for highlighting a number of the important changes that are coming. He is right that our objective is to squeeze out the bad practice in the sector. There are honourable people out there and there are honourable ways in which it is done, but where bad practice occurs it gives the entire sector a bad name. We will legislate and regulate to remove it in a proportionate way.

My hon. Friend also highlighted an example of a property that has not yet made progress on remediation, and similar examples were given by the hon. Members for Brentford and Isleworth and for Walthamstow and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster. We can see significant progress. We have only recently produced a new detailed set of data covering all the funds that are open on building safety. I hope hon. Members will see the progress that has been made, but we recognise that there is more to do. The hon. Member for Walthamstow is absolutely right that there are a number of names that pop up repeatedly—for example Y&Y Management and E&M. There are many others and they should be on notice that they need to change their practices, because they are not acceptable.

Matthew Pennycook: The Minister touched on building safety. In the briefing notes on the Bill that accompanied the King's Speech, under the heading "Improving leaseholders' consumer rights", reference was made to:

"Building on the legislation brought forward by the Building Safety Act 2022".

Is it the Government's intention to incorporate building safety measures in the Bill?

Lee Rowley: We are looking at what may be possible. We recognise that, while the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has brought forward a very solid prospectus, tweaks can always be made. We see real momentum in this area. I know that that is not good enough for buildings that have not yet had their remediation or for leaseholders who are hugely frustrated by the inability or unwillingness of freeholders to make progress, but we have made significant changes and steps forward in the last year or so, and we are committed to doing more in the coming months.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Shropshire for meeting me earlier to talk about specific points about assets. We will look at those points and come back to her.

I can confirm to my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills that we intend to tackle ground rents. I am grateful to her for highlighting exceptions in leasehold houses. We intend that to be a very narrow element. She sought an example. One example I can give is that of National Trust land where freeholds cannot be sold and a small number of leasehold homes may therefore be required.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby talked about his disappointment with, I believe, the consultation on ground rents. We must consult on that because we must ensure that we are listening and that we take a decision based on the broad range of evidence in front of us, to ensure that it is legally sound when the decision is made. He encourages me to speak to the Law Commission. I can tell him that I have spoken to the Law Commission probably more regularly than any other external organisation outside the Department in the past three or four weeks.

The hon. Members for Walthamstow, for Battersea and for Brentford and Isleworth are seeking to push a narrative—if I may say that very gently to them, with the best of intentions—that this is not a significant intervention with regard to flats. I gently encourage them to continue to engage with the Bill. They will see long and cheap extensions, easier enfranchisement, service charge transparency, easier redress, lease extensions, standard forms, annual reports and many, many other significant measures that will have salience for those living in flats.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) for his constructive comments. I look forward to meeting him in Committee to talk about them more. While I may disappoint the right hon. Member for East Ham, I would like to turn to some of the comments made from the Opposition Front Bench.

The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), despite acknowledging that the Government have brought forward important legislation, despite confirming that Labour would not be opposing it and despite advancing the most enthusiastic compliment I

have ever heard her give a Conservative—that the Secretary of State has reached the lofty heights of being a “functional cog”; heavy praise indeed!—showed that, as ever, she deals in rhetoric rather than reality, and in politics rather than policy. She called the Bill “empty”. This is a Bill with 65 clauses, eight schedules and 133 pages, and there are 67 pages of explanatory notes. Given its comprehensive reform of enfranchisement and extensions, its comprehensive reform of redress, and its comprehensive reform of service charges, estate management and valuation, that is a funny definition of “empty”.

Bob Blackman: I asked the Minister to answer this question in summing up the debate. Will he undertake to include the outcome of the consultations that are currently taking place, particularly that on ground rents, in the amendments that the Government table in Committee?

Lee Rowley: That is our intention, yes.

We have had a good debate today, which I hope—indeed, I know—will start the passage of this important Bill into law and lead to a better system for everyone in the long term. This is an outcome that is fundamentally Conservative because, fundamentally, the Bill is about empowering people, about levelling the playing field where it has been distorted, about reining in those who are trying to rent-peek for no purpose at the expense of those who just want to get on with living their lives, and about giving people the security of home ownership—proper home ownership, for the long term—so that they can build their lives and build their futures. I hope that all Members will join the Government in supporting the Bill tonight, and I look forward to further constructive conversations during its future stages.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

LEASEHOLD AND FREEHOLD REFORM BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 1 February 2024.

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

Consideration and Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Scott Mann.)*

Question agreed to.

LEASEHOLD AND FREEHOLD REFORM BILL (MONEY)

King’s recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Scott Mann.)*

Question agreed to.

LEASEHOLD AND FREEHOLD REFORM BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill, it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees under or by virtue of the Act.—*(Scott Mann.)*

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): We now come to the motions for appointments to Select Committees. Unless there are any challenges—and I have been notified of none—I propose, with the leave of the House, to take them all together.

Ordered,

BUSINESS AND TRADE

That Bim Afolami be discharged from the Business and Trade Committee and Julie Marson be added.

DEFENCE

That Jesse Norman be added to the Defence Committee.

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

That Mark Jenkinson be discharged from the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee and Derek Thomas be added.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

That Saqib Bhatti be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Ranil Jayawardena be added.

HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL BILL (SELECT COMMITTEE)

That Sir Mike Penning be discharged from the Holocaust Memorial Bill (Select Committee) and John Stevenson be added.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

That Paul Holmes be discharged from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and Tom Hunt be added.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

That Tom Tugendhat be discharged from the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy and Sarah Atherton be added.

PROCEDURE

That Aaron Bell be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Nickie Aiken be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That Ashley Dalton, Jill Mortimer and Nick Smith be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Paula Barker, Sarah Owen and Jeremy Quin be added.

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

That Aaron Bell be discharged from the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and Dr James Davies be added.

TREASURY

That Sir James Duddridge and Dame Andrea Leadsom be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Dr Thérèse Coffey and Stephen Hammond be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

Dover Fastrack

8.52 pm

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I rise to present a petition submitted by my constituents in Dover and Deal who are concerned by the Dover Fastrack proposals. The petition has attracted about 700 signatures, led by those of Father Leo Illah and parishioners from St Paul's Roman Catholic Church in Maison Dieu Road, and is also supported by the diocesan bishop, the Right Reverend Paul Hendricks.

This is a poorly considered proposal that will add to traffic congestion, disadvantage older and disabled people, damage local businesses and shops in the town of Dover, and harm access to the church, including access for weddings and funerals and access to the world-renowned Pilgrims Way. The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore...urge the Government to call on Dover District Council and Kent County Council to re-think the planned Pencester Road Fastrack Proposals.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Dover and Deal,

Declares that the proposals to route Dover Fastrack along Pencester Road and Maison Dieu Road in Dover will pose a significant risk to pedestrian safety, increase traffic congestion and jeopardise the invaluable cultural and heritage contributions of St. Paul's Catholic Church to the area of Dover.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons urge the Government to call on Dover District Council and Kent County Council to re-think the planned Pencester Road Fastrack Proposals.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002887]

Housing Availability: Ilfracombe

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Scott Mann.) 8.53 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): I am very proud to be Ilfracombe's MP. It is a tight-knit resilient community of 12,000, and so remote that it has to be self-sufficient. It is 12 miles from Barnstaple, the major town in northern Devon, and almost 60 miles from Devon's county town, the city of Exeter. At the start of the pandemic, it made national news by being the first community to fully develop a delivery and support network across the town, and the community continues to look after its own and all those who visit.

Ilfracombe is both rural and coastal, with a stunning harbour, a hardy fishing fleet and its own lifeboat station reflecting the treacherous coastline and rugged cliffs. It is one of those seaside towns that were popular with the Victorians but then got cut off with the closure of the train line in the '70s. It has suffered from under-investment ever since. Tourism remains the No. 1 industry of the town. This creates its own challenges, with many small businesses choosing not to register for VAT and closing at the £85,000 threshold, leaving swathes of employees in seasonal work and on out-of-season benefits.

However, Ilfracombe is not a low-wage economy; it is a low-skill economy. Some 20% of over-16s have no qualifications at all, often leading big employers in the town to recruit internationally and break down jobs into those that match the skills. We see far too many of our bright youngsters head off to university, never to return. The south-west suffers from a youth exodus, with the highest number of 16 to 24-year-olds and the highest number of students leaving of any region. That has implications for those left behind.

School attainment gaps in the south-west between poorer pupils and the rest are the largest of all English regions at the end of both primary and secondary school, and that is not to mention the recruitment, retention and training challenges that exist for isolated and remote schools and the lower levels of school funding and teacher pay. Ilfracombe has the second biggest catchment of any secondary school in the country, with absenteeism running at 10%, which is a similar number to the percentage of people in Ilfracombe who have never worked and will never work at all.

Deprivation runs deep in Ilfracombe. As foreign holidays became the norm, old hotels became homes in multiple occupation. Ilfracombe even featured in the '80s comedy show “Bread” as somewhere to move to, and some of those old hotels became care settings for those with addictions and no housing elsewhere in the country to be moved to. We have wards in Ilfracombe where over a quarter of the population are registered disabled under the terms of the Equality Act 2010. The town is still littered with derelict buildings and has 20 large buildings unoccupied. They are falling down and intermittently one is burnt to the ground. Surely there must be more that can be done to tackle these derelict buildings and bring them back into use.

Ilfracombe has the lowest healthy life expectancy of any rural town in the country, and a life expectancy over a decade below that of the healthiest towns in Devon. There are not big queues for healthcare in Ilfracombe. People often do not even present, despite lifestyle choices

contributing to poor health. There is an acceptance that things are good enough, but they are not. I have attended more meetings on the issues of deprivation and health inequalities in Ilfracombe than I care to list. People care deeply about the issues in the town but solutions are hard to come by, which is why I have come to the Chamber to ask the Minister and his Department to help.

We were elected on a manifesto of levelling up, and on any metric whatsoever Ilfracombe clearly needs to be levelled up, yet the resources to tackle the root cause of the problem are not forthcoming. Having seen endless pieces of analysis, I know that the primary issue is shockingly poor housing. Some 37% of the population in Ilfracombe rent, and given that we have no university students, that is staggeringly high. Post pandemic, house prices have jumped by 53%, which is one of the highest rates in the country. That is understandable, as it is a beautiful place to live, but suffice it to say that wages have not increased by the same levels. We have lost almost two thirds of long-term rentals, mostly to short-term holiday lets, and far too many of the remaining rental properties are substandard. The council is apparently powerless to intervene unless there is something like a fire, and the pictures that I have circulated to the Department of the conditions that families are living in are unacceptable.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward; I spoke to her beforehand and I understand the issues clearly. She has outlined the issues of tourism, fishing and youth unemployment in north Devon, and now the issue of housing. As a representative of the small harbour village of Portavogie in my constituency of Strangford, I fully understand the pressure of finding affordable housing in these little communities. Does she not agree that social housing in rural communities must be a priority to enable people to remain with the family support that they have and the friendships they have made over the years?

Selaine Saxby: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I will talk about affordable housing and, as he represents a coastal constituency, I am sure he will recognise what I am about to say.

Storms batter the North Devon coastline at this time of year, and old hotels shabbily converted into flats, some with no insulation, are taking the elements week after week and should be condemned, but the last thing we need is even more derelict buildings that no one will do anything with.

Because Ilfracombe is only a small part of North Devon, the metrics used to determine where the first round of levelling-up funding was spent meant that we were in the lowest category, and our tiny district council did not have lots of potential bids ready to go for Ilfracombe. A strong bid was submitted, although it was ultimately unsuccessful, but we all knew it was not going to level up Ilfracombe; it was just to secure some funding.

At the time, a senior council officer raised the issue of housing and what was really needed, but the levelling-up funds were all about transport and tourism, not housing. I am grateful to the new chief executive of Devon County Council who, arriving this spring from the remote and rural highlands, saw the deprivation in my constituency,

and she was in my office weeks after her appointment to ask what was going on with Ilfracombe. Since her arrival and renewed focus, more councillors and council officers than ever before have headed north of Tiverton and made it up to Ilfracombe to see the problem. I am the only MP on the Devon Housing Commission, which has also visited.

It is hard to reconcile the fact that we are not worthy of levelling up, when we have 50 families looking at their second Christmas in a holiday park because there is not a single home available for them in northern Devon. Indeed, not a single affordable home has been built in Ilfracombe since 2006. The first are now under construction but, as another district council leader said during the presentation of these facts to the Devon Housing Commission, "Is this not a dereliction of duty?" Indeed it is.

Although our tiny district council knows that there is a problem, it does not have the resource to deliver a solution. At the end of the pandemic, my county council told me that my constituency was home to five of the 10 most deprived wards in all of Devon. My question was, "What are you going to do?" It is only with the new chief executive's arrival that a proposal has been forthcoming. Six costed proposals, with different elements to tackle housing and skills, are with the Department.

I am grateful to the previous Levelling-up Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison), for visiting Ilfracombe and meeting the council, and I am grateful for the engagement of the current Levelling-up Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Jacob Young). I very much hope that the promised meeting will deliver a plan as, quite simply, North Devon and Ilfracombe do not have the resource to resolve the housing situation on their own.

My frustration at the multiple tiers of local government, which have resulted in so much talking and so little delivery, is great. We simply have to tackle some of the housing issues in the town before we can tackle the others. I am delighted that a family hub for the town will be forthcoming. On average, because Devon County Council covers a huge area, many things in Devon look fine, or at least not bad, which hides pockets of deep deprivation in places like Ilfracombe, and we have missed out on far too many schemes and pots of money because the average looks fine but does not take into account the variance across the county.

Will the new devolution deal deliver anything to Ilfracombe? Unfortunately, time and again, we see money going to urban centres and not reaching smaller communities that are equally in need. Liberal Democrat-run North Devon District Council is apparently able to deliver only one project at a time. I had the pleasure of spending Friday morning with the council leader, who explained why the bus station in Barnstaple could not be upgraded because the council is too busy with the future high street project to tackle a second issue. I have confidence in the council officers, if not the political leadership, to understand what needs to be done, but there is a resourcing issue of both people and finance.

If we need to attract external funding to tackle some of these housing challenges, we do not have the experience of managing such projects well. We desperately need responsible social landlords to take on some of the properties in Ilfracombe, bring them up to standard and maintain them. Again, when will there be progress

[Selaine Saxby]

on the registration scheme for short-term rentals? Will the Minister ask the Treasury to level up the tax inequalities between long-term and short-term rentals to attract long-term landlords back to the market? All that happens at present is that we seem to get more retirement properties, second homes and properties being snapped up as holiday lets. As of yesterday, there were 19 rental properties in Ilfracombe being advertised on Rightmove and 803 on Airbnb.

The Minister has told me that there is not a fund that my council's bid can be accepted into at this time, but given that deep dives have been done into other seaside locations that replicate Ilfracombe's position, just on a far bigger scale, is there really no opportunity to look hard at these small coastal communities and the challenges they face? My father was head of a large coastal comprehensive in the middle of a council estate back in the 1980s, and the issues he faced there were identical to the ones I faced in North Devon when I retrained to teach, just ahead of my election to this place. We have to tackle social mobility and educational outcomes, but when people cannot afford to stay in their community because of a lack of affordable housing, and businesses have no incentive to grow because of the VAT tax threshold, it is hard to drive aspiration as a concept. The frustration that the Government are spending money overseas to house people who come to our shores illegally when we cannot house our own is immense. All I ask is that some resource is given to tackle what are shocking statistics at any level and leave Ilfracombe as the third most deprived rural town anywhere in the country. We know from so many pieces of research the stats on coastal communities, and we must seek to level up some of these smaller communities that are not big enough to stand out in national statistics.

Levelling up was supposed to reach into all communities, not just big towns and cities. I am very proud of the Ilfracombe community. It is has fantastic church and community leaders who work tirelessly to try to tackle the issues the town faces and look after their population. However, given the long-term, intergenerational nature of the issues, and the level of investment needed, we do need some help. Now that we have a plan to tackle issues, we are a step further forward than we were when I first raised the issues of Ilfracombe in this place. I see no point in trying to make political points out of this; for almost 20 years, nothing has been done, by councils of all different colours, to tackle the problem. The Government have highlighted the need to level up, and I very much want the next generation to be able to afford to stay and work in the high-tech green industries that we hope will be coming ashore along our coast. I very much hope that the Minister will be able to provide some hope that we may at last be able to tackle some of the root causes of the deprivation Ilfracombe suffers and, in particular, tackle its housing supply.

9.7 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): Let me start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for the opportunity to debate these important issues, as it is vital that Members have the opportunity to discuss them. Making sure that there are viable, aspirant and successful towns all across the country is a hugely

important part of our job, one that motivated me to come to this place on behalf of North East Derbyshire. I know that it clearly motivates my hon. Friend to do the same for North Devon. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities officials were pleased to hold a recent roundtable in Ilfracombe, which she mentioned. Officials and agencies had a productive discussion about some of the opportunities and challenges that she has rightly highlighted, and some of the points about support. I also recognise her for the important work that she does with the Devon Housing Commission, on which, as she said, she serves, and I am looking forward to seeing the results of that work. I want to spend 30 seconds just championing her in general, as she is one of the most diligent Members of this House. She is so utterly engaged in the issues that are important to her constituents and it is so important that that is the case. I know that North Devon residents will be very grateful for all the work she does.

Obviously, housing is vital for the Government's long-term plan for economic recovery. In July, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) set out a long-term plan for housing, to usher in a new era of regeneration and housing delivery all across England. We are talking not only about more houses, but houses in the right place that are absolutely seeking to service and support local demand.

We are on track to achieve our manifesto commitment to deliver more than 1 million homes over the course of this Parliament. Since April 2010, more than 2 million homes have been delivered, and four of the highest annual periods for housing supply in the past 30 years have come in the past half decade or so. It is absolutely vital that we build more houses, but we need to build them in the right place and in a way that responds to local demand, as my hon. Friend has said. We will continue to work with Homes England. I have already met my hon. Friend a number of times to discuss the matter, but my offer to work in partnership with her remains, so we can see what we can do for North Devon in the long term, as well as constituencies around the country.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of aspiration, which we know can be a challenge in some of our smaller towns. We must ensure that we are not just giving people things, as important as they are—a lot of the discussion about levelling up has been about things. We need to give them the tools to go and change their lives for the better. If we can inculcate aspiration into our kids as they go through school and into our communities as people build their lives and businesses, and if we can ensure aspiration is at the core of everything we do, that is a fundamentally Conservative prospectus upon which to make our communities even stronger. It is also the most successful way to make our communities stronger in the long term.

The new funding announced in the autumn statement through the levelling-up partnerships, the further investment zones, the new investment opportunity fund and other funding for transformative projects across the country will make a real difference in areas where funding has been agreed and where it will come in the months ahead. Ilfracombe has benefited from Government funding to support increased housing and infrastructure, including the brownfield land release fund, which will provide

15 self-build and custom-build properties in Bicclescombe, Devon. In addition, £6.5 million from the housing infrastructure fund has been made available for the Ilfracombe southern extension. However, I take my hon. Friend's point that much more needs to be done and I am happy to work with her on that.

We remain committed to creating a housing system that works, including increasing first-time buyers in every single region across the country. We are operating a range of schemes, including first homes, shared ownership and mortgage guarantee schemes, all of which aim to increase the supply of low-deposit mortgages and the availability of new housing, and to stimulate economic growth.

We know that first-time buyers can often struggle to afford to buy a home in the areas where they live and work. I have spoken to my hon. Friend previously about those challenges in North Devon. Key workers can find themselves unable to live in the communities they serve, as my hon. Friend highlighted. Initiatives such as the first homes scheme, while not perfect, allow local exemptions to be set under key worker criteria. I hope that communities up and down the land that are facing those challenges are able to use those schemes, but we recognise that there is always a longer conversation to have on that issue.

My hon. Friend is right to raise the basic point of fairness. This week, we will be talking about a number of other issues in this place; tomorrow, we will be talking about those who come to our shores illegally. She is right to highlight the views of her constituents that there has to be basic fairness with people coming to this country, so that we can make the case that the work we do on levelling up works for the long term. I hope we can make progress on that specific and broader point tomorrow.

My hon. Friend and I also spoke recently about community land trusts as a way to support housing supply that meets the needs of the local community. The community-led approach to house building involves community-based groups taking responsibility for driving

forward local house building schemes. That support, and the close involvement of local communities, enables the securing of planning permission and the delivery of housing on sites. I hope that that is a possibility in North Devon in the future.

We have already spoken several times since I was appointed as Housing Minister a few weeks ago about the importance of getting clarity for my hon. Friend and other colleagues in Devon, Cornwall and elsewhere regarding short-term lets. In a debate in Westminster Hall a number of weeks ago, we talked about the importance of tourism for areas such as North Devon, and the importance of clarity about what is happening with regard to short-term lets. While I am still unable to give a specific timetable, my hon. Friend and her colleagues in the south-west have impressed upon us all in Government the urgency of providing clarity about both the register and what we intend to do with the planning use class. We will try to move forward on that as quickly as we can, and give clarity to communities such as North Devon as soon as possible.

I thank my hon. Friend for prompting this important debate and giving us the opportunity, even in a small way, to discuss Ilfracombe—both the opportunities and the challenges—and to recognise that there is much more conversation to be had outside this Chamber with regard to its future. Places such as Ilfracombe, just like places such as North East Derbyshire, which I have the privilege to represent, have hugely bright futures if we can give communities the tools to get on and make those communities as aspirational as they can be. We need to ensure that Government support works for the long term, and continue the very good conversations that my hon. Friend has started and on which she is at the forefront, to ensure that she is championing places such as North Devon for the long term.

Question put and agreed to.

9.15 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 11 December 2023

[SIR MARK HENDRICK *in the Chair*]

Israel and Palestine

4.30 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 648225, 648383 and 648292 relating to Israel and Palestine.

It is a great accomplishment to reach the threshold of over 100,000 signatures for a petition to be considered for debate. I wish to congratulate the petitioners—Husnain Iqbal, Shihab Osmani and Ibnan Ali—who are in the Public Gallery, for starting the petitions that we are debating. From my meetings with the petitioners, I am aware that this is the first time that they have used our e-petition system. I hope that they will see that their engagement with Parliament has led to today's debate and that they are pleased with the discussion.

Since the sickening Hamas terror attack on 7 October, we have all been gripped by the unfolding tragedy: the grief of those who have lost family members who were among the more than 1,200 killed in the terrorist attack, and the civilians, many of whom are children, who have been displaced, injured and killed in Gaza. The humanitarian crisis deepens—an estimated 17,700 people have lost their lives in Gaza, according to the Gaza Health Ministry—and so this debate is timely and important. We will consider how the UK should respond immediately to the humanitarian need and how it should begin to look to building a sustainable peace.

Before I was elected to this House, I had the privilege of visiting Israel and the occupied west bank. Although I did not visit Gaza, I was able to visit Jerusalem. I was inspired by the Palestinian and Israeli citizens I met, who are dedicated to working to build peace. Just as those inspiring individuals worked and continue to work for peace, during this debate, a Parliamentarians for Peace candlelit vigil will be held just outside this place, in New Palace Yard. That event will aim to promote peace and a recognition of our common humanity, as well as marking international Human Rights Day—that was yesterday, 10 December—and the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights being adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. I know that many colleagues wanted to take part in this debate and in the Parliamentarians for Peace vigil. Indeed, with the devastating loss of life in the middle east, Ukraine and other wars across the world, we must use our positions as elected representatives of the people to strengthen calls for peace.

This debate must begin by roundly condemning the brutal Hamas terrorist attack. We hold the family and friends of the more than 1,200 who have been killed, and the estimated 138 who remain hostages, in our thoughts and prayers. We also remember all those who have lost loved ones in the conflict and stand with all those who feel threatened and unsafe in the UK, because of the rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia resulting

from events in the middle east. The petitioners have asked me to remind the House that, when we approach this conflict, we must absolutely condemn the terror attack, but must also remember that the history of the conflict did not begin on 7 October. That means that the UK has a particular role to play, given its historic part in the Balfour declaration.

The debate today concerns three petitions. The first calls for the UK to remain neutral in the Israel-Palestine conflict and withdraw support for Israel. The second urges the Israeli Government to allow fuel, electricity and food into Gaza. The third calls on the Government to seek a ceasefire and an end to Israeli occupation in the west bank and Gaza strip.

I turn to the position of the Government and other petitioners. Although the petitions each call for different actions, they share a call for the protection of lives, British humanitarian support and the upholding of international law. In the wake of the terrorist attack and Israel's military response, the Government have defended Israel's right to self-defence in line with international law, have provided aid to Israel and significantly increased aid to Palestine, have reiterated a commitment to a two-state solution, and—in the strongest words—condemned the west bank settlements.

I want to see a lasting peace in Israel and in Palestine. The first step to building peace is the laying down of weapons. That is why I voted for a ceasefire, out of concern for the dire humanitarian situation for the people of Palestine, particularly the vulnerable, who are caught up in the crossfire of this conflict.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making such a powerful speech. Was she as disappointed as I was on Friday when the United Nations Security Council failed to support a ceasefire, in particular as the result of the UK abstaining on that matter and not providing the support that was needed for that resolution?

Cat Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and for the work she is doing on the Parliamentarians for Peace vigil that will happen in about 25 minutes. I share her disappointment at the outcome of that vote.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): I appreciate the hon. Member giving way. She talked about her support for a ceasefire. Does she recognise, as I do, that the temporary truce that we have recently seen in Gaza led to about 80 hostages being released, to an end to the bombings, and to hundreds, if not thousands, of lives being saved? We gave peace a chance. Does she agree that the best way to secure a lasting peace settlement and an end to innocent lives being lost in both Gaza and Israel is the push for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza?

Cat Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I share the feelings that he has just expressed. In fact, he pre-empts the contribution that I was about to make, which is that the temporary ceasefire last week was a brief respite for the 1.8 million people displaced in Gaza, and therefore it was that opportunity for aid provision to come in and for the release of hostages. However, unless there is a permanent ceasefire, we will never find a permanent peace.

[Cat Smith]

There is no doubt that it was incredibly moving to see the videos of families being reunited, and it is impossible to imagine the fear and the worry of the families of those who remain hostages. However, as Israel continues to seek to destroy the terrorists Hamas, the fear and threat of injury and death continue. The temporary ceasefire was merely a brief respite and as the conflict continues, the needs of the displaced and injured people in Gaza are increasing. We need to address that through aid and through diplomacy.

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): On that point about moving past the temporary truce, we are now 10 days on from that and it occurs to me—I wonder whether my hon. Friend concurs—that there is no clear strategy from Government as to how we, as the UK, can help to prevent the suffering of innocent Palestinian civilians and end the violence we are all witnessing. To that end, does she share my hope that when the Minister responds to the debate, he will set out exactly what the Government are doing with international partners now to break what seems to have become a diplomatic stalemate following the truce, and bring about the permanent ceasefire that is surely the only way to bring this devastating situation to an end?

Cat Smith: I share the—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. As I said before, this is quite a long debate, but that being said we have a lot of people here. Can we keep interventions brief? Thank you.

Cat Smith: Thank you, Sir Mark, and I hope, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western) does, that the Minister can respond with more details of the commitments the Government are planning to make in order to work with the international community to bring about that lasting peace.

I say that because we must look to the future and any solution to this conflict must be a solution that respects the human rights of both Israelis and Palestinians, and establishes a statehood solution that includes ending the intolerable settlements in the west bank.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): To go back to the question of neutrality, there may have been a position some years ago whereby the United Kingdom Government could have said that they were taking a neutral and balanced position on the conflict in the middle east, but is it not the case that the result of last Friday's vote at the United Nations now puts the United Kingdom as an outlier in world opinion—alone, with the United States of America—in not calling for a ceasefire? Does that not demonstrate the need for this petition to be recognised and for the United Kingdom to return to a position of neutrality rather than support for the war?

Cat Smith: I can see that the Minister has heard that intervention and I think that it is probably something that he might like to respond to my colleague on in his remarks.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the petitioners. Yesterday marked the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that it is unthinkable that the world can commemorate that significant day while denying Palestinian human rights? We are seeing thousands of civilians—men, women, children; doctors, journalists, poets—all being murdered by Israeli forces for no crime other than being Palestinian. Humanity cannot be applied selectively.

Cat Smith: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House's attention to the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights, which was born out of a tragedy that was almost unspeakable in its scale. That is something that is probably at the forefront of all our minds, and certainly should be in this debate.

I take heed of your warning, Sir Mark, about many colleagues wanting to speak and will draw my remarks to a close so that we can hear from as many colleagues as possible, and as fully as possible, during this debate. As parliamentarians, we can never return the lives of those who have been lost, but we must use our positions as elected representatives to help to prevent further loss of life, by calling for peace and working to provide vital humanitarian aid. I look forward to hearing the contributions from colleagues today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that if they wish to speak, they should bob—as many of you are doing now.

4.42 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. May I say “Chag Hanukkah sameach” to you, as Jews celebrate Hanukkah at this time? But we are celebrating Hanukkah, which is of course the Festival of Lights, at a very dark time for Jews not only in this country but around the world. It would be remiss of me not to mention the protest that took place at the weekend, which again involved—from a minority, admittedly—gratuitous signs of antisemitism, which led to the Holocaust Educational Trust chief executive, Karen Pollock, again saying that the centre of London had become a no-go zone for Jewish people. No part of this country, of our democracy, should ever be a no-go zone for any community.

I think, as I look around in this debate on the three petitions, that I am the only person here who has visited the site of the pogroms that took place on—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps some others have been since. I will give way to the hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) if he wishes to intervene.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend in this instance. Just to correct the record, I was at a kibbutz, Kfar Aza, in February, seeing how tranquil and peaceful it was despite the proximity to Gaza, so I have seen that, and I am going out next month as well.

Andrew Percy: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I meant since the events of 7 October. I am not sure whether anybody else has had the opportunity to spend time in

the communities that were attacked in the most horrific way on 7 October and to spend time with the survivors and with the families of the hostages from those communities, so I will avail the House of my experience there this afternoon.

Let me come to the three petitions. Of course, in relation to the second petition, we all want to see humanitarian aid being facilitated and delivered into Gaza, so I have no issue with that petition—absolutely not. We all wish to see that. It would be helpful, of course, if Hamas did not steal a lot of the aid and misdirect it towards their terror network, but of course every effort should be put into that aid. However, in terms of the third petition, calling for a ceasefire, I find it incredible that we have people arguing that a ceasefire is achievable with Hamas, who, since 7 October, have made it absolutely clear that it is their intention to commit such atrocities again and again. There can be no ceasefire with Hamas—none whatever. Their intention, in their own charter, is to seek the annihilation of not just every Jew in Israel but every Jew on this planet. Let us not pretend for a moment that there is any credible option of a ceasefire with Hamas. That is a position, I am pleased to say, that both the Opposition Front Bench and my own Government's Front Bench support.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Perhaps he can explain to us what his long-term objective is. Will the citizens of Gaza be bombed indefinitely until Hamas surrender?

Andrew Percy: The question that the hon. Member should be asking is, what is the long-term strategy of the—

John Nicolson: I will ask the question that I want to ask.

Andrew Percy: The hon. Member has had his intervention. He does not get to shout from a sedentary position again; he gets to listen to the response. That is the polite way in which debates operate in this House.

It is a very clear position that Hamas must be degraded to such a point that they can have no further involvement in the governance of the Gaza strip. That is the position of this Government; it is the position of Governments across Europe; it is the position of the United States Government and of many others around the world.

When I visited Israel less than a month after the attacks took place, I went to the place where bodies were being identified. I saw those bodies, and I saw those body parts that were still awaiting identification. It was one of the most shocking and horrendous things that I have ever seen or have ever smelled.

I also visited Kibbutz Kfar Aza, which is a kibbutz that was founded by peaceniks—it was actually founded by Egyptian Jews. It is a community that was led by Ofir Libstein, who was a man known for his desire for peace and was in the process of trying to seek a joint-employment zone with Gaza so that Jews from Israel could work alongside Gazans. He was picked out specifically by Hamas and shot on his front doorstep. The scene in that kibbutz was just utterly horrendous.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: No, I will not give way at the moment. It was like something I have never seen and will never forget. We heard about and saw the most horrific destruction carried out by those terrorists. Women had their breasts sliced off. There were children who had their limbs sliced off in front of their parents. There were people butchered in the most horrific ways. Sir Mark, you can still see that destruction in that kibbutz, as you can in the kibbutzim across southern Israel, and you can still smell it. Such was the butchery and the savagery that the smell of the rotting blood and flesh is still there several weeks on. So I am not neutral when it comes to this conflict—not one bit.

As if the destruction in the kibbutzim were not bad enough, we, of course, had the appalling gender-based violence that was committed by Hamas terrorists on that day. Let us just consider some of that, particularly for young women who were attending the Nova music festival—a festival, ironically, for peace, of course. Some of the witness testimonies from there are truly shocking. I will read some of them for you, Sir Mark. “They had caught a young woman near a car and she was—”

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): Order. There are many hon. Members wishing to speak, so I will introduce a time limit of five minutes.

Andrew Percy: After I have spoken, presumably. I think I am the only Back Bencher speaking on the Government side, Sir Mark, so most of this debate will be dominated by the Opposition parties.

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): There was another of your colleagues here who intervened but has now left. Having said that, you are partly correct.

Andrew Percy: Thank you, Sir Mark. I thank you for your protection. People may not want to hear it, but it is important that these things are put on record, so that, when we are asked to take a neutral position on this, people know exactly what evil was wrought across Israel on 7 October and since—and that the people who did that intend to do it again.

I will start those quotes again:

“They had caught a young woman near a car and she was fighting back, not allowing them to strip her...They threw her to the ground and one of the terrorists took a shovel and beheaded her and her head rolled along the ground. I see that head”

to this day.

“They sliced her breast and threw it on the street.”

“He penetrated her, and shot her in the head before he finished.”

“I saw this beautiful woman with the face of an angel and eight or ten of the fighters beating and raping her. She was screaming, ‘Stop it...I’m going to die anyway’. When they finished they were laughing and the last one shot her in the head.”

When there is such butchery and such horrors have been wrought on innocent people, I am certainly not going to take a neutral position.

The humanitarian pause was mentioned. Of course we all want humanitarian pauses, because we want all the hostages to be released. I think that we can all agree on that. It is important to record that those hostages were taken against their will from their homes; some of them are as young as 10 months old. We still do not know what has happened to the Bibas family, for example, and their cute 10-month-old, ginger-haired baby; we do

[Andrew Percy]

not know whether he is alive or dead. Those who have come out so far have recounted examples of sexual violence. Eitan Yahalomi, who is 12 years old, was forced at gunpoint to watch the beheadings and the murder of people from his own community, and 77-year-old Margalit Mozes was denied access to medication while in the terror tunnels. They were denied any access to independent treatment, and children were marked by having their skin burned. That is what happened. That is what we are dealing with in this conflict.

We all want to see peace across the middle east. I want to see a viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel. I am proud to serve as patron of a charity that brings children from Gaza into Israel to receive life-saving treatment. We are all appalled by what we have seen and want an end to the violence, but I will not pretend for a moment to support the petitions or to take an independent, neutral position on the matter. I want Israel to succeed. I want Israel to succeed in defeating Hamas, because defeating Hamas is in the best interests of everybody in the region, not least the Palestinians living in Gaza, who themselves have suffered the most appalling abuse under that leadership.

It is great that people have engaged in the civic process of signing petitions, but there can be no ceasefire with Hamas, who have made it clear that they are not willing participants in that regard, and I will not pretend in any way, shape or form to urge the Government to support one. I hope the Minister will continue his strong support for Israel's right to self-defence, for increased aid to the Palestinian people living in Gaza, and for efforts at a humanitarian pause, which we all wish to see, but Hamas must be defeated.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Mark Hendrick (in the Chair): There are lots of speakers, so I will introduce a five-minute limit. I know that the previous speaker spoke for longer than that, but, as he said, he is one of only a couple of speakers on the Government Benches, apart from the Minister, so I have tried to be fair. I call Alison Thewliss.

4.53 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Gosh, thank you very much, Sir Mark—it is much earlier than I was expecting to be called. I am glad to be here representing many of my constituents, over 2,600 of whom have written to me—more than on any other issue—to raise their concerns about the ongoing conflict in Gaza. They also signed the petitions in their hundreds, because they are deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict. There have been many demonstrations in my constituency to call for peace, for a two-state solution, and for the UK to take its role and responsibility seriously. As many of the people who have written to me have said, we can express our horror at Hamas's atrocities on 7 October and the ongoing plight of the hostages, and we can also express our horror at the situation the Palestinians are facing now: dead and dying under the rubble, and dying for lack of food and water.

ActionAid has been in touch with me to express its concerns about the disproportionate impact on women—yes, the gender-based violence that was experienced

at the hands of Hamas in their attack in Israel, but also the ongoing situation in Gaza, where women are disproportionately impacted by the violence. Rather movingly, Riham Jafari, the advocacy and communication co-ordinator at ActionAid, said:

“What use is a four-hour pause each day to hand communities bread in the morning before they are bombed in the afternoon? What use is a brief cessation in hostilities when hospital wards lie in ruins and when roads used to deliver medical supplies and food are destroyed? With over half of Gaza's hospitals closing due to fuel shortages or constant bombardment, there will soon be nowhere to deliver medical supplies to at all. Without fuel in any aid packages, a humanitarian pause does nothing to repair Gaza's destroyed health system or allow families to cook themselves a meal or power water to their homes to shower. While a humanitarian pause might offer a brief respite for a few days, it is nowhere near enough time to repair the damage to Gazan communities and their homes and lives.”

I could not agree more with that statement.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I associate myself with everything the hon. Lady has said so far. Is the problem with a pause not that pause means play, and play is not acceptable? That there are hospitals that are no longer functioning is the reason why I have lost a family member in this war. They were not bombarded; they needed a hospital and they could not get to it. They are still in Gaza City, and even if more aid were to be allowed through Rafah, it would not get to Gaza City. Is the issue here that, while we all condemn Hamas and we all want Hamas gone—frankly, if Hamas went it would be good for the region, not just for the Palestinians—what is happening to all these citizens of Palestine who have nothing to do with Hamas is only fuelling more insurgency, not less?

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I point to the situation of Dima, a student at Glasgow University who worked for the World Health Organisation. Her life, her child's life, and her family were lost to bombardment. She had done nothing wrong. She was doing her very best to support people, as are many medical professionals in Gaza, who are trying their very best to make sure that people are looked after in these most desperate of circumstances.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): There are 350,000 people in Gaza suffering from infections. There are 46,000 who are injured and cannot be treated. Procedures are being carried out without anaesthetic. Gaza's health system has been reduced to just a third of its pre-conflict capacity. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that there is an urgent need for an immediate and permanent ceasefire?

Alison Thewliss: I would agree. The difficulty is that there is no end to this conflict in sight. We cannot see what the terms for ending this conflict will be as things stand, but we do know that all conflicts eventually end. They end with a ceasefire; they end with a piece of paper signed; they end with agreements being reached. The UK Government's role in this is to seek to reach those agreements, not to seek to stand in the way of them.

I would also like to mention the 52,000 pregnant women in Gaza right now. Some 5,500 babies have been born in the past month—183 every single day. Those babies are being born in the most traumatic of circumstances. Giving birth can be traumatic enough at the best of times, let alone without hospitals, medical

care or even anaesthesia. Women are having caesareans without painkillers, while awake, and under bombardment. That is no way to bring babies into this world. Other women who have had to flee their homes are in camps lacking sanitary provision, privacy and dignity. When will they see an end to this conflict? When will they be able to see hope for their babies and their families?

I very much support the aims of the petitions here today. I look forward to hearing other people's contributions to this debate. My Glasgow constituents are very clear that there needs to be a ceasefire now.

4.58 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Like everyone who has watched the footage and read the accounts of the Hamas atrocities on 7 October, and anyone who has followed the utter devastation and mass killing happening in Gaza and the growing violence in the west bank, my overwhelming response is, "How do we stop this?" That is why I urge the Government and the Labour Front Bench to support an immediate bilateral ceasefire.

The UK's fence-sitting at the UN last week was unforgivable both morally and politically, as anyone who heard Tom Fletcher, a former ambassador to Lebanon and advisor to Gordon Brown, explain on the radio this morning will know. He recalled that back in 2009, at the height of Operation Cast Lead, the UK took a principled stance in support of ending the killing of civilians and backed UN resolution 1860, which was critical of Israel. In doing so, it shifted the position of the US, which ended up abstaining on that vote instead of opposing it. Bold, creative diplomacy by the UK made a significant difference to the outcome in the UN and, critically, there was a ceasefire a week later. A similar kind of diplomacy is sadly lacking now, and we desperately need it.

Of course, the scale of the deaths and the horror is vastly different now, but the fundamentals of then and now are the same: the lives of civilians in both Israel and Gaza must be protected. This is what these petitions are about: making the suffering stop for the families in Israel who are desperate for their loved ones taken hostage by Hamas to be unconditionally released and safely reunited with them; making sure the perpetrators of the horrific rapes and sexual violence committed on 7 October are brought to justice; stopping one of the worst humanitarian crises in my lifetime—half of the people in Gaza are starving, and starvation is being used as a weapon of war; making the military assault on Gaza stop, and saving the lives of so many children; and stopping not just these immediate crises, but the decades of oppression and dispossession of and discrimination against the Palestinian people by the Israeli authorities, which are an unavoidable part of the context of this war.

A lot has already been said about how to bring this conflict to a close. Decades of expert diplomacy has failed thus far to resolve this seemingly intractable conflict. In the past 15 years alone, there have been five wars, each of which has consigned the people of Gaza to ever-deteriorating and unimaginably impoverished living conditions. None of these wars has stopped the rockets being fired at Israel, or made anyone feel safer. That is because there is no military solution to this conflict, only a political one.

Yet it has served the international community—the UK included—preoccupied elsewhere, to settle for a strategy of uneasy containment in which violence flares up from time to time and just enough supplies and aid are allowed into Gaza to appease Israel's critical friends and prolong the status quo. However, since October 7, something seismic has shifted. It is now inconceivable that the world could continue to ignore the importance of ensuring that every single Israeli and Palestinian can live safely, securely and with dignity within their own borders or a shared border, if that is what they choose.

We have touched on the issue of speaking with terrorists. Talking to Hamas has already helped to bring some Israeli hostages home to their families. Those lines of communication must be kept open, along with every back and front channel accessible via the other players in the region. Clearly, the US has the greatest influence over Israel, but the UK can play a critical role too. Its links with Qatar and Egypt, for example, should be used to pull every lever possible in support of a consensus on Israel's right to exist—a fundamental building block of peace.

Chatham House reported that the US and UK position on not talking to terrorists arose almost by accident in 1973, in response to hostage taking by a Palestinian militant organisation. Those hostages were killed. It takes courage to start a dialogue, especially when we have no real idea whether there is even a shared goal, let alone how to reach that outcome, but from Northern Ireland and Colombia to Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon and Syria, talking has secured positive outcomes for individual cases and more broadly. No dialogue means the death of peace, and at this time we absolutely have to keep the prospect of peace alive.

The eyes of the world may well be on this narrow strip of land right now, but they have been largely absent as Gazans have been forced to live in an open prison, systematically stripped of their dignity and freedom by both the Israeli authorities and Hamas. As Israel has endured the existential threat to its existence that Hamas represents, and as land is grabbed and settler violence erupts in the west bank—an area that now could well see the strengthening of extremists including Hamas—we must not turn our gaze away again. The path to peace feels even more difficult following 7 October. It is more difficult, but more urgent, too. It starts with a bilateral ceasefire now.

5.3 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is 20 years since shock and awe were unleashed on Iraq. Millions died, and we live with the consequences today in terrorism and a refugee crisis. It was a war perpetrated on lies and deceit, and it is why we must have openness and transparency in the conflict in Gaza today.

The events of 7 October have to be condemned. What Hamas did was shocking and unacceptable, and every country has a right to defend itself, but the response from Israel has been disproportionate. It now constitutes a war crime, and it has to stop. It is for those reasons that we have to support a ceasefire, not a humanitarian pause.

Those of us of the Christian faith will be celebrating the birth of a child in a manger in but a matter of weeks, yet children in the sanctuary of a hospital in

[Kenny MacAskill]

Gaza cannot be kept alive because we cannot provide them with the care and welfare that should be theirs as a matter of right. That is something that should fundamentally shame our world, not just our Government.

A humanitarian pause is entirely inadequate. This is not a replication of the play “Oh! What a Lovely War”, in which soldiers stop for a Christmas truce and play football before it all starts again. This is the perpetration of a war on civilians. Let us remember that we are talking about 2 million people in a very small area of this world—an urban, compact area. They were told to flee from the north by the Israel Defence Forces. They have fled south and the bombing has followed them. They are dying there as they died in the north, so the idea that we can simply have a humanitarian pause is inadequate.

We have to welcome the pause that took place and appreciate that it did progress matters and see hostages returned, as should rightly be the case, but we have to call for and demand a ceasefire. We all know that Israel is sustained by the United States. If it were not for the United States, Israel would be unable to maintain its warfare. We must ensure that we deliver a ceasefire.

The UN Security Council’s position was not shameful. It supported a ceasefire, but the United States vetoed it and a supine UK simply abstained and did not have the courage to go with the rest of the world. As with Iraq, the rest of the world is looking at the western world and seeing nothing but hypocrisy. We rightly speak out about the wrongs e happening in Ukraine, yet we are far too silent about what has happened elsewhere in the world to people of different faiths or a different colour. The failure of the UK to support a ceasefire at the United Nations Security Council was unacceptable and the actions of the United States were simply reprehensible.

Israel is continuing to wage war against civilians. They might say that they are targeting Hamas, but it is clear that—

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way. Given the death and destruction in Gaza, we must look into the issue of arms sales to Israel. The UK’s export control joint unit is clear that licences will not be granted if

“there is a clear risk that the items might be used to commit or facilitate internal repression”

or

“a serious violation of international humanitarian law”.

Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must re-examine all licences to ensure that we do not inadvertently end up facilitating a violation of international and humanitarian law?

Kenny MacAskill: Absolutely. The arms trade is reprehensible. We should cease that not just because of what is happening in Gaza and Israel, but because of what is being perpetrated in Yemen while we continue to arm the Saudis. We have to address not simply the arms sales but the assistance that we might be giving deliberately or accidentally.

RAF Akrotiri is being used by the US military. What are the US military flying into Israel from RAF Akrotiri? Why are we not being told what the Americans are

taking from a Royal Air Force base in Cyprus into Israel? Is it machinery? Weapons? Military personnel? We have a right to be told. Why have 500 additional UK military personnel gone to Cyprus, where we already have several thousand troops? Why are they required there? What is their role? What is the nature of the military personnel? Are they special forces? Things are taking place and we are not getting clarity from the UK Government.

Just as we had a cop-out at the United Nations Security Council, we are not getting clarity from the Government as to our role. What are we doing to facilitate the United States and the armaments that they provide to Israel? What are we doing about the actions that are being perpetrated by the Israelis? We should be speaking out. It is clear that what is being perpetrated by Israel is first of all to flatten the north of Gaza into smithereens so that life cannot return. People will not be able to go back and live there. The Israelis have destroyed the infrastructure and now they are perpetrating it on the south of Gaza, again destroying the infrastructure and making Gaza unliveable. The requirement will then be for people to flee—no doubt the US will try to get Egypt to take them in as refugees. The outcome of that will be that the Nakba all those generations ago will be replicated in Gaza. If we do not take action and speak out we will be as guilty now as we were then.

We have to stop supporting the Americans, we have to stop supporting the Israelis, we have to demand a ceasefire, and we have to make sure we are not complicit in any way. That means having the courage of our convictions and supporting a ceasefire at the United Nations, where the UK has a position as a regular member. We also have to ensure we do not facilitate any other shameful action, whether that is by allowing the Americans to do it, or directly through munitions that are created here in the United Kingdom.

5.10 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Mark. Following the contribution of the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) is a task in itself.

Last week, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary regarding the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The temporary truce was a welcome development allowing for the release of hostages and access into Gaza for some humanitarian aid, but as soon as the temporary truce ended on 1 December, the fighting resumed. Hundreds of Palestinians were killed when the Israeli military resumed their indiscriminate bombing campaign against Gaza. This resulted in the death toll rising to well over 17,000 people, with the largest group being children. The scale of death and destruction cannot be overstated. The ongoing violence against the Palestinian people simply cannot be justified and constitutes clear collective punishment.

What the short-lived truce demonstrates above all is that temporary pauses in conflict are simply inadequate and will not result in de-escalation. The preferred approach to the conflict on the part of the UK Government is therefore no longer tenable. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the atrocious crimes being committed against Palestinians, and it is evident that only a long-lasting ceasefire will prevent further loss of life and allow space for peace talks to emerge.

Afzal Khan: Yesterday marked the 75th anniversary of the UN's universal declaration of human rights. Today, the UN confirmed that half of Gaza—more than a million people—are starving: 90% do not have access to food on a daily basis. Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot commemorate Human Rights Day without calling out the barbarism of the Israeli army and the unimaginable human rights abuses against Palestinians?

Tahir Ali: My hon. Friend makes a very pertinent point. The international convention on genocide has also just marked its 75th anniversary. The UK Government simply cannot continue to ignore the evidence of war crimes being committed by Israel in its campaign against the Palestinians. There is an unstated objective of a single-state solution. That is why I think the UK does not recognise Palestine as a state: because it supports the unstated objective of Israel to have a one-state solution. A one-state solution should not be the objective. If there is going to be a two-state solution, where Palestine lives in peace alongside the Israeli state, now is the time for the UK Government to recognise Palestine as a state.

Why did the UK Government abstain when 13 of the 15 members of the Security Council voted for a ceasefire? One member can veto 13. The UN Secretary-General invoked article 99, which has not been invoked since 1989, with the sponsorship of nearly 100 countries, but one country can then defy it by railroading a veto. That goes to show that the United Nations is nothing but a toothless tiger that is now being used against the Palestinian people.

Nor can this Government continue to ignore the monumental displacement of people in Gaza, the largest since 1984. What is occurring looks increasingly like ethnic cleansing, and we must not be complicit in that. I therefore take this opportunity once again to urge the UK Government to use their international standing to push for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and the resumption of peace talks as a matter of urgency.

It is not enough simply to recognise the clear injustices being perpetrated in the context of this conflict alone. The Palestinian people have been subject to oppression, exploitation, theft and violence for decades. Their land has been illegally seized by the settler groups. They have been evicted from their rightful homes in East Jerusalem, and they have lived under constant blockade and occupation. Day by day, the Israeli Government strive to make a two-state solution less and less tenable. It is now obvious that the current Israeli Government have no interest in a lasting, just and equitable two-state solution. The UK must rise above that and recognise Palestine as a separate state.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an impassioned speech. Does he agree that, while the absolute priority for all of us must be to bring an end to the violence from all parties in the middle east and to stop the intolerable death toll in Gaza as quickly as possible, the conflict can only ever be truly resolved when there is a concerted effort by the international community? Ministers must therefore explain why, for over 10 years, this Government have been content to stand on the sidelines rather than pursuing a meaningful political strategy in conjunction with our international allies.

Tahir Ali: My hon. Friend makes a very strong point. On 6 December, we saw 13 UN member states voting on one side, with one abstention and one veto, which means that the voice of the vast majority does not count. Hundreds and thousands of my constituents write to me every day urging this Government to take a stand, with over 7,000 signatories to the three petitions and over 10,000 emails received by my office on this subject—not only on this conflict, but on historical abuses suffered by Palestinian people.

It is not enough for the Government to say that they are in favour of peace, when they do nothing to bring it about. This Government still refuse to recognise the state of Palestine and continue to ignore the breaches of international law committed by Israel in its war against Gaza. My constituents in Birmingham, Hall Green will not settle for simply working to end this conflict. They also demand, and rightly so, that Israel be held accountable for its action, both current and historic, against Palestinian people.

I have referred to the United Nations as a toothless tiger. How many United Nations resolutions has Israel broken? My understanding is that there are over 30 resolutions to which it has not adhered. That is why I urge the Government not only to work towards a permanent ceasefire in Gaza, but to support efforts to investigate the conduct of this war and to determine the extent of the war crimes being committed. Based on such an investigation, the Government must be prepared to take robust action and hold those responsible for such crimes to account, including through the imposition of practical sanctions and other diplomatic measures.

5.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak, Sir Mark. From the outset, I am aware that this is a very sensitive issue and that we are talking of the loss of life, which is awful. At the beginning, I have to make a declaration so that it is very clear where I stand: I am a friend of Israel, and I have been all my life. I was a member of the Friends of Israel when I was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont, and I am a friend of Israel speaking in Westminster Hall today. I recognise that many people around me may have a different opinion. I respect their point of view; I hope that Members will also respect my point of view when I put it over.

We are talking about the lives of women and children, and the loss not simply of their daily life but of their home and even their education. This affects communities on both sides of Israel's border. Communities on the border of Israel have been displaced and homes have been destroyed, as well as in Gaza. This premise must underline everything that is said today: war is terrible, and the end of war is what any right-thinking person is hoping for. For those who are in a position to do so, it is what they are working for, I believe.

I am certain that, regardless of the result of this debate, Hamas terrorists—that is what they are—will continue this attack. Rockets will continue to fly from Hamas positions towards Israel's positions—not military positions, but civilian positions; the murder of civilians is their intention—and the Israelis will continue their counter-attack and opposition. Over the past days, the war against Hamas has continued to focus on southern areas of the Gaza strip, and the Israel Defence Forces

[Jim Shannon]

have sadly confirmed the deaths of a further seven Israeli soldiers since last Monday, who were defending and protecting their people.

The horror of Hamas and of their intention on 7 October has been outlined by the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), who spoke very graphically of it. I am aware of some of the videos. I have to say honestly that I could not watch them, because they were so horrible: the beheading of men, the rape of women, the murders of children. They are depraved people who carry that out. Hamas terrorists must be destroyed. They must be dismantled. They must find themselves in a position where they can no longer have any influence whatever in the middle east. That is exactly what I believe.

The bombs continue to rain down on Israel. Indeed, the IDF confirmed that an Israeli civilian had been killed by missile fire from Hezbollah.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: No, we are on a very strict time limit of five minutes. Everybody has to get in, and there are many other speakers.

The Israeli civilian had been killed by missile fire from Hezbollah in northern Israel, prompting Israeli responses against terror targets in southern Lebanon. This is an important consideration in this debate: the fact is that there are still numerous and sustained rockets being fired at Israel daily. In the time in which this debate has taken place, there have been more attacks on Israeli civilian places as well. People talk about the Iron Dome, but it must be remembered that it is not a power-up in a computer game—it is more than that. When the launcher is called into action, it saves lives, and that is very important.

The Iron Dome air defence system intercepts at least nine in every 10 munitions fired into Israel by Hamas terrorists. That means that rockets do land and do cause damage; again, we must recognise that. Israel has 11 Iron Dome batteries, and with the threat of a war breaking out on the northern border with Hezbollah, the US has reportedly pledged two more. I would very much like to see that happen. US help for Israel can and will make a difference, and it will save lives.

Brigadier General Doron Gavish, a former commander of Israel's aerial defence force who worked on the Iron Dome when it became fully operational in 2011, has said:

“Unfortunately, Hamas is not shooting for the military installations, it's directing all its rockets towards the cities and civilians. It is a system that is really designed to save people.”

As we sit in this warm building today, comfortable as we are, calling for a ceasefire, we must be certain about calling for the right thing. We must be helping to put in place sustainable solutions—long-term solutions. I believe in a two-state solution. I believe that when the war is over and Hamas are destroyed and dismantled, we can then have a peace that can last. Long-term solutions will allow hospitals and schools to be built in Gaza and people to return home to Israel and to health and safety. That is what this House should be calling for, should work for and should wave our unified flag for.

While Israel is suffering attacks, and while it continues to root out terrorists who are aiming at civilians in Israel, there are steps to be taken. Am I calling for a ceasefire? Yes, I am calling for a bilateral ceasefire. For those who do not understand that, it is very simple. Once Hamas are destroyed, they can no longer have an attitude towards Israel that means the destruction, annihilation and murder of all Israelis. That is what I am looking for, but under circumstances, when it comes to a ceasefire, that do not see more terrorism and a worse position in 10 days' time yet again.

5.23 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is so difficult to get information in and out of Gaza. One of the only reasons that we know what is happening on the ground is the heroic work of journalists and photographers who are documenting the catastrophe.

I do not have words to describe what we have seen. It sickens me to my core. We saw children in Gaza hold a press conference, begging the world to save them, and I thought it could not get worse. But then we saw white phosphorus dropping from the sky, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw doctors say that hospital grounds felt like a warzone, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw premature babies lying to die in incubators with no energy, and we thought it could not get worse.

Then we saw a pregnant mother burned and dead, while doctors cut the baby out to try to save at least one life, and we thought it could not get any worse. Then we saw a little boy crying hysterically, “How can we stay here? This is not a life!”, after his nephew was severely injured while playing football, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw a little girl scream, “Oh, dad, don't leave us!”, after her dad was killed by an airstrike and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw children write their names on their body parts, so that if they were killed they could be identified, and we thought it could not get worse.

Then we saw a bereaved mother call out the names of her children—Baraa, Moataz, Taysir, Aya—who were killed and still under the rubble, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw whole bloodlines wiped out, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw a 37-day-old baby pulled out of the rubble, thankfully alive, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw a newlywed bride crying while holding the shoes of her dead husband, who she had been married to for only six months, and we thought it could not get worse.

Then we saw injured Palestinians from northern Gaza travelling to the south on foot, as there were no ambulances available, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw a mother crying and saying, “It took me 580 injections to have him,” while holding her dead baby, and we thought it could not get worse. Then we saw a mother bid farewell to her dead son by saying, “Please forgive me, dear son.” So I ask: how much worse does it have to get? What is the number of innocent Palestinians who need to die in order for there to be calls for a ceasefire?

Palestinian journalists such as Motaz Azaiza risk their life in order to document the atrocities on the ground. We have witnessed the deadliest month on record for journalists, with 63 dead so far. Their posts are not simply Instagram reels to watch and forget about; this is

information that must be gathered and used to form cases at the International Criminal Court, to hold those responsible accountable.

There must be accountability from both sides for the horrors that we have witnessed. The taking of innocent hostages by Hamas was atrocious, as too is the collective punishment of the people of Gaza by Israel, along with the continued escalation of violence in the occupied west bank. I have previously called for an independent investigation by the ICC into war crimes committed during this conflict. The UK Government must support an ICC investigation to ensure that those who have breached international law face justice.

Amy Callaghan: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Qaisar: I will make progress.

People across all four nations, including my Airdrie and Shotts constituents, demand through marches, petitions and emails that the UK Government back a ceasefire. We must end the suffering, we must stop this humanitarian tragedy, and we must have a permanent ceasefire.

5.27 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): My constituency has the highest number of signatories to two of the petitions being debated today, and the third highest number to the other. This came as no surprise to me, because I have been inundated: the situation in Gaza has been the topic of the greatest number of representations that I have ever received.

Having grown up in the area, the anti-war and anti-imperialist values that are held very strongly in east London shaped me as a person long before I was elected to this House. I share the absolute horror at the disregard for Palestinian life that has been displayed across the political establishment. It is estimated that the Gaza death toll has increased by 40% since before the temporary humanitarian truce. The staggering level of civilian deaths that are happening as we speak is horrifying. The human rights abuses are horrendous.

Time and time again, my constituents ask me: how is this being allowed to happen? What is it about Palestinian people that means that, for this Government and the political establishment, there appears to be no limit to what can be done to them, no limit to how many can die and no care as to their rights? Why is it that when Palestinian children die in unprecedented numbers, there is so little outrage? Why is it that when Palestinian women are killed, it is barely even acknowledged? Why is it that Palestinians and those showing solidarity are told they cannot even express pain at their suffering? Why is it that the Palestinian flag seems to be the only national flag in the world that people are told is unacceptable?

It is also important to recognise that, following the 7 October attacks, there has been a stark increase in attacks on Muslims, including attacks and hostility against individuals and mosques, with children being targeted at school, death threats being issued and physical attacks. Just last week, more than 700 people were evacuated from the East London Mosque and London Muslim Centre and three nearby schools, following a bomb threat, amid a rise in Islamophobia across the UK. I am seeking action from this Government to ensure that the East London Mosque and London

Muslim Centre and other places get the security that they desperately need. Islamophobic hate crimes do not only affect the victim; they have a ripple effect through communities as they reinforce established patterns of bias, prejudice and discrimination.

It is particularly poignant that yesterday marked the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights. The preamble to the declaration states that “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”.

Honouring that means calling an immediate, permanent ceasefire; it means that the slaughter and degradation in Gaza must end, the ongoing oppression and dispossession of Palestinian people must end, the illegal settlement programme must end, the forced evictions must end and the illegal occupation of Palestine must end. And, yes, there must be immediate recognition of the state of Palestine.

However, with the latest veto, we instead see the US Government enabling immense civilian suffering, a staggering death toll and an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe. The UK Government’s refusal to support a ceasefire will be paid for with death, destruction and the suffering of innocent individuals. Despite the horror we are bearing witness to, human rights and international law must not be allowed to be abandoned. More and more people all over the world are speaking out to protect humanity from further destruction.

5.31 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As of today, it is estimated that 17,000 have been killed in Gaza—around 7,000 of the dead are children, and 63 journalists have been killed. Israel has a right to defend itself; the attack on innocent Israeli civilians was wicked beyond description. But surely we can agree that what we have been witnessing long ago tipped from justifiable self-defence into brutal attack.

Most of the world watches, horrified by the continuing heavy, deadly, inhumane bombardment of a tiny patch of land, the Gaza strip, and of the terrified and traumatised people living there—dying there. Israel tells them to flee, but to flee where? Where do people flee if every border is closed? When they do try to flee, they are bombed. International law says that care must be taken to safeguard civilians. What care is Israel taking? It has bombed schools, hospitals and homes. A university was flattened. Collective punishment is another war crime.

These war crimes are committed not by a monstrous terrorist group such as Hamas, but by a country that we laud as the only democracy in the region. Most Palestinians and Mediterranean people had no time for the zealotry of Hamas, but who will the orphaned children of Gaza turn to when they crawl out of the rubble? Bitterness and hatred have been planted deep in the souls of innocents. They will remember these weeks for the rest of their lives.

What of the UK? Surely we have a special responsibility, as the former occupying power. Our abstention on the UN ceasefire resolution on Friday shamed us. Labour’s abstention on the ceasefire motion in this Parliament shamed its party leadership. Many honourable MPs stood up against the intense pressure they had to endure from their party Whips, but what is Labour doing

[John Nicolson]

abstaining on an issue such as this? At what point will the Labour leadership realise how desperately out of step it is with public opinion and decency?

Only four Back-Bench Tories have thought the most crucial—

Alison Thewliss: They are not even Tories.

John Nicolson: I beg your pardon—I am not wearing my glasses. I will do that again for the edit. How can so few Conservatives turn up to a debate such as this? It really is dreadful. How can Tory and Labour Front Benchers watch and stay silent? How can the Labour leader, watching this carnage and cruelty, say the Israeli Government are within their rights to withhold water from children—yet another crime? The Labour leadership's volte-face, when it comes, will be excruciating to watch.

UK neutrality, food to the starving, water, electricity for the hospitals, a halt to the bombardment and death; that is all that our constituents want us to argue for and vote in favour of—basic humanity. Otherwise, where does it all end? I suspect that, far from being weakened, extremist groups will be strengthened, which would be the worst possible outcome.

The hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) said that the bombardment must continue indefinitely, until Hamas surrender. Hamas are not going to surrender. Why should innocent Palestinians trapped in Gaza pay the price, with this wicked organisation, Hamas, raining terror down upon them? Why should ordinary people pay the price?

This conflict cannot be won by military means. If we study the history, we must surely know that. Only a ceasefire and negotiations can stop this carnage, so I call on colleagues on both sides of the House to raise their voices for peace and an immediate ceasefire.

5.36 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark. I thank the petitioners for bringing the debate here today. I want to start by condemning the atrocities that took place on 7 October and by calling for the immediate release of the hostages. However, since the atrocities on 7 October, the world has watched as massacres, bombardments, starvation and communal punishment continue to be levelled against innocent Palestinian civilians. Homes, schools and hospitals have turned into rubble. The collective punishment of the Palestinian people is a crime against humanity and in violation of international humanitarian law. Israel's refusal to allow water, fuel, electricity, food and medical supplies to reach people under unprecedented assault is unjustifiable.

Save the Children has said that if the children in Gaza "are not killed by the bombardments, they will be killed by hunger. If they are not killed by hunger, they will be killed by disease."

One Palestinian dies every five minutes, but that could have been averted if the US and the UK had voted in favour of the Security Council resolution for a ceasefire. That would have ended the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians and the mass displacement of Gazans towards the south of the strip, which is threatening to push them into the Sinai, in the biggest land grab and ethnic cleansing since the original Nakba in 1948.

A child who is 16 years old in Gaza today will have known five successive bombing campaigns and spent their entire life under blockade. The sheer level of trauma, pain and grief that they have already experienced is almost unspeakable. All of us who bear witness to these crimes have a duty to speak up, and those of us with the privilege of power have a duty to do everything humanly possible to end them.

This weekend, traumatising images that emerged from Jabalia refugee camp were widely reported. Palestinian men were stripped naked, bound and blindfolded by Israeli forces, invoking images from some of the darkest passages of our history. The International Federation of Journalists, working closely with the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, has verified that at least 70 journalists have been killed in the violence, with many others missing and feared dead. It has said that journalists are dying at four times the rate of the general population. These journalists are all that stands between the truth and a total media blackout in Gaza; they should never be a target, yet the numbers reveal a very concerning picture.

I echo the calls from the National Union of Journalists to pay tribute to the bravery of journalists in Gaza and to their commitment to their work. Without them, we would not be able to hold the Israeli Government to account for the horrors unfolding in Gaza.

Time and again, we have heard from Ministers that they are, in no uncertain terms, pushing Israel to take precautions, to act within the confines of international humanitarian law and to show restraint and care for civilian infrastructure and life. However, on his media round this morning, the Defence Secretary failed to condemn the detention of Palestinian children in military prisons.

Afzal Khan: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kim Johnson: No, I am sorry. I am going to make some progress.

We know that that will not happen without meaningful international action to ensure that Israel cannot continue to act with impunity. The UN Secretary-General has invoked article 99 of the founding UN charter, formally warning the Security Council of the global threat from the attack on Gaza. A ceasefire is the bare minimum we must demand, yet our Government have failed in their humanity. How many more innocent Palestinians have to die before the leadership of this country takes action?

To conclude, our Government urgently need to move towards a permanent ceasefire. We must also go further and take bold steps to end the cycle of violence, including the indiscriminate killings of Palestinians in the west bank by right-wing extremist settlers. The ICC must investigate potential war crimes by all parties and bring to justice those who are found guilty. History will not judge kindly those who looked away. We must do everything in our power to bring these atrocities to an urgent end with a permanent ceasefire.

5.40 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I unreservedly condemn the crimes of Hamas and particularly the crimes of rape and sexual violence against women. Hamas are terrorists backed by Iran, and we all know how they treat women. However,

"The laws of war must guide Israel's response"

to Hamas's atrocities. Those are not my words, but those of a group of eminent Jewish lawyers in a letter to the *Financial Times* back in October. That group included the former President of the UK Supreme Court, Lord Neuberger, and Philippe Sands KC, one of the world's foremost experts on international law. Their measured and scholarly letter is particularly impactful, because they write as Jews with family and friends directly affected by the terrible crimes perpetrated by Hamas on 7 October.

Three important points were made in that letter. First, the crimes of Hamas are crimes against humanity. The barbarity inflicted by them and the taking of hostages are war crimes. Secondly, under international law Israel has the right to respond and to defend itself and its citizens. But thirdly and very importantly, that response must be in accordance with international law and particularly the laws of war. The letter says:

"These laws apply irrespective of the level of outrageous conduct of an enemy and no exceptions to those rules can be derived from the level of suffering caused by Hamas's actions."

The importance of the international community acting to make sure the laws of war are obeyed, and of our collective moral and legal responsibility to avoid another genocide, have been at the forefront of my mind since I visited Srebrenica earlier this year. The message of Srebrenica is that never again must the world stand aside while innocent civilians are tortured, raped and murdered and that never again must the world stand aside while populations are deported or forcibly transferred or have imposed on them deliberately conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction in whole or in part. I believe that we are pretty close to that, if not beyond it, in Gaza.

The lessons of Srebrenica demand a humanitarian response to the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians. We must resist the idea that collective punishment should be visited on the Palestinian people for the crimes of Hamas, whether that collective punishment consists of seemingly indiscriminate bombing, the restriction of water, food, fuel and electricity to Gaza, or the order to Palestinians to evacuate. As the occupying power, Israel has a clear obligation under international law to ensure that the basic needs of Gaza's civilian population are met. Clearly, it is not doing that. As others have argued, given our history in the region and the Balfour declaration, the United Kingdom cannot stand aside. It shames us that we have stood aside so far, particularly at the United Nations.

Over 1,000 of my constituents have signed the petitions before us. In my nearly nine years as a Member of Parliament, I have never received more emails on any topic than I have on this one, and the vast majority call for a ceasefire in Gaza. My constituents want the UK Government to take swift, urgent action to establish a permanent ceasefire and to press Israel to lift its total closure of Gaza, reopen its crossings and allow the safe, unimpeded movement of aid—that includes fuel, food and medical supplies—and of aid workers, medical personnel and sick and wounded people.

My constituents want the British Government to oppose any action to coerce or forcibly transfer the population out of Gaza. They also want them to demand that Israel ensures the protection of Palestinian civilians, wherever they are, and guarantees that displaced people will be able to return and rebuild their homes.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I associate myself with the hon. and learned Lady's earlier comments about Hamas. Does she agree that the UK Government should look at a process whereby we can get Palestinians over to the UK, as we did with the Ukraine scheme? They can return to their homes once it is safe to do so.

Joanna Cherry: I very much do. I raised the issue with the Minister in the main Chamber last week in relation to the elderly mother, pregnant sister and small baby of a constituent. It is incumbent on the British Government to look seriously at humanitarian visas, particularly given our links with the region and how many of us have constituents with family there. These people will not want to come here permanently, and they will want to go back to their homeland, so the Government need not worry about the long-term net migration figures. As a humanitarian country, we should surely be looking at humanitarian visas.

The point of my speech—I say this because I am a lawyer and this matters very much to me—is that Britain has an obligation under international law to prevent war crimes and to prevent another genocide from happening, but it is not fulfilling that obligation. I know that the Government never reveal their legal advice, but I want to hear from the Minister whether they are alert to their international legal obligations, and to what extent they are taking those on board. In fairness to him, he responded very generously to my question about this issue in the main Chamber last week. I want to hear that he and other Foreign Office Ministers will pressure the Home Office—and goodness me, does it not need to be pressured to do anything humanitarian?—to grant humanitarian visas to Palestinians who want to come to the United Kingdom for temporary respite before they go back to their homes.

5.47 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Mark. We are debating important petitions regarding Israel and Palestine, which rightly call for the enormous suffering to end. In addition to the thousands of Luton South signatures that were added to the petitions, I have received thousands of emails from constituents who are deeply concerned about the ongoing situation in Gaza and the west bank and horrified by what they see every day on their TVs and phone screens.

I share my constituents' concerns. We are watching the destruction of Palestinian lives in Gaza and the west bank, as well as Israeli lives on and since 7 October. Luton is a hyper-diverse town, but it wants peace across the middle east. In remembering our common humanity, I join calls for an immediate, permanent ceasefire on all sides. In this, I echo statements by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, respected organisations such as the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children and Islamic Relief, and a range of faith leaders.

I welcomed the temporary ceasefire announced in November alongside the release of hostages. However, there remains a desperate need for a permanent ceasefire, a significant increase in humanitarian and medical aid, the return of hostages, and a renewed political effort on all sides to come to an enduring resolution for peace. We must be unequivocal: civilians must be protected and not displaced; humanitarian aid, medical supplies

[Rachel Hopkins]

and fuel must be allowed into Gaza; and hostages must be released. I have made it clear in this House and in correspondence to the Prime Minister and to the Foreign Secretary and his predecessor that the UK has a duty to ensure that international law and the human rights of the Palestinian people are upheld.

Yet this Conservative Government are failing. The UK should be leading the international community in bringing about peace. Labour has been clear that Israel must not besiege or blockade Gaza. Schools, hospitals and other civilian infrastructure must be protected at all costs. The ongoing bombing of Gaza has so far killed over 17,000 Palestinians, and 40% of them are reported to be children. Constituents who have written to me have said that more than half of all homes have been destroyed and that only 14 hospitals out of 36 are even partially functional. Now, 1.8 million people are displaced—that is 80% of the population—and there are reports that half the population are starving.

The international community can and must secure a lasting ceasefire to make political progress to end the conflict. That means creating an Israel secure from Hamas, and ensuring that Palestinians can see a path to statehood and the reconstruction and renewal of Gaza, and I press the Minister to set out the Government's plan to make that a reality.

5.50 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I rise to represent the thousands of constituents who have written to me and signed petitions. The reality is that Gaza is now a graveyard for tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children; a continuing nightmare without food, water, power or medicine for those left alive; and an ongoing Nakba for the 2 million displaced.

In the last few days, the EU's head of foreign policy has labelled the bombing campaign as "one of the most intense in history",

while the UN's humanitarian affairs chief has described the situation as "apocalyptic". Such is the magnitude of the war crimes committed and the scale of indiscriminate bombing and violations of international law in their lethality that in the time during which this debate takes place, a further nine women and 12 children will have been killed. Let this House reflect for a moment on that.

Of those who survive, many will remain trapped in the rubble of homes, schools, hospitals, refugee camps, mosques and churches. Of those who receive medical attention, all will face surgery without anaesthetic or pain relief. With hygiene, sanitation and healthcare facilities left destroyed, normally preventable diseases are now ripping through the population. Palestinians are not even afforded dignity in death, with their bodies decomposing under rubble, mauled by stray dogs and eaten by worms. This is the reality of the humanitarian nightmare that Palestinians are facing each and every day. Yet despite the death, destruction and human misery in Gaza caused by the Israeli military's bombs and bullets, when the UN Security Council voted just days ago on a ceasefire resolution that would have brought an end to this bloodshed, the UK sat on its hands and did nothing.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is the case that 1,400 of my Leeds East constituents have signed these petitions, so people out there do care. When my hon. Friend reflects on the UK Government's shameful abstention at the United Nations Security Council in the vote on a call for a ceasefire, does he agree with me that it is about time that the UK Government joined the overwhelming majority of the international community—including France, Spain and Portugal, among other European nations—and backed the call for a ceasefire to save lives, end the suffering, release all hostages and make a better future?

Imran Hussain: Of course, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I was saying, the ceasefire resolution was an opportunity to bring the bloodshed to an end, but the UK chose to sit on its hands and do nothing—that was a choice that the UK made as a Government. Instead of taking the lead, the UK abstained, and instead of working on the lasting, peaceful resolution that we need to see, the UK confirmed, by making that choice, that it was content with a bloody status quo in which civilians are slaughtered in their thousands. Although that may be the view of the UK Government, let me make it absolutely clear—I think I speak for many hon. Members in this House—it is not the view of our constituents and it is not the view of the majority of the country. It leaves yet another moral stain on our Government and makes it clear that our foreign policy is set not by the Prime Minister or the Foreign Office but by the United States. All this Government have had to do, when ordered to jump by the US, is ask how high.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Imran Hussain: I will not. Time does not permit it.

The UK's failure to back the ceasefire resolution, and the ability of the United States to overrule 13 votes in favour of it, without a single other state against, frankly brings into question the legitimacy and viability of an international system that is so clearly broken. Indeed, when the UN Secretary-General is pleading for action and every UN agency is begging for a ceasefire to protect civilians, we have to ask ourselves this: what, exactly, is the point of the United Nations, when it can so easily be overruled and ignored? The situation is appalling and shameful and makes a mockery of any claim to support an international rules-based order with the UN at its core. Seventy-five years ago, we made a commitment to uphold human rights and international law for all people. It is time that our Government stopped only supporting the UN when it suits them and started supporting its efforts to protect civilians wherever in the world—not just in Gaza but in the west bank, and not just in Palestine but in Burma, Kashmir, Yemen, China and countless other regions across the globe.

Time permitting, I will take this opportunity again, on behalf of myself, the thousands of my constituents and the millions of people around this country who want to see an end to this bloodshed, to implore the Minister to listen to the calls of the public petitions, to other hon. Members, to the UN agencies and humanitarian organisations and to those in Gaza who are desperately calling out for help, and back the calls for a lasting ceasefire to end this bloodshed now.

5.57 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): During the business statement last Thursday, I asked the Leader of the House whether we could have a full day's debate on the Israel-Gaza war. I do not know whether the Minister has had a communication—I know that the Leader of the House is assiduous about such things—but perhaps he will be able to tell us, when responding, whether that will be granted early in the new year. It is frankly very surprising that we have not had one. I am sure that, if the Government will not grant it, the Backbench Business Committee may do so. I thank the petitioners not only for the 600,000 signatures on the three petitions but for achieving what the Government have not achieved, which is to allow us to have a substantive debate on this subject for the first time. If my maths is right, 2,773 of those signatures come from my constituents: that is substantially less than the number of emails that I have received from constituents on this matter—by a hundred to one, literally—calling for a ceasefire.

[STEVE McCABE *in the Chair*]

The first petition reminds us that breaches of international law are nothing new in the Israel-Gaza dispute. Seventy-five years ago, the Nakba saw the displacement of 750,000 Palestinians. That is a crime in international law. Fifty-five years ago, settlement building began, and it continues apace; indeed, it has accelerated.

The second petition deals with the issue of blockade. Again, blockade is nothing new: Gaza has been blockaded for 16 years and, for that reason, it is still regarded in international law as occupied. Clearly, what is happening now—almost totally to shut off aid, or to have very inadequate amounts of it entering Gaza—is a form of collective punishment and, again, a breach of international law. We have displacement of almost the entire 2 million population of Gaza, and we have bombing on an indiscriminate scale—carpet bombing—that is destroying not only lives but much of the civilian infrastructure. That is why I believe that the third petition is right to call for a ceasefire.

Earlier in the main Chamber, I asked the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), why Britain had abstained in the vote on the United Nations Security Council resolution. As I understand it, he said that there was a lack of condemnation of Hamas and that the Government are against a ceasefire per se. I think we would all join him in wishing that the UN would speak loudly, as all parties in this country have, in condemning the atrocities of Hamas, including the hostage-taking and the massacre on 7 October, which are, again, crimes against humanity. However, that does not invalidate the UN Security Council resolution, and my response to the reasons given for opposing a ceasefire—namely, that it will not be observed by either party—is that there are precedents for ceasefires happening. The pause that we had recently was a type of ceasefire, which was observed by both sides. Frankly, I do not see anything wrong with calling for a ceasefire. I think that the more voices that are added to those calls, the better, and the UK's voice would be a powerful one.

Why cannot we call for a ceasefire when it appears that breaches of international law are happening? Certainly, prima facie that is the case. I hope that this country, as an upholder of international law, would do that. The fact

that we are approaching 20,000 deaths, most of them deaths of civilians, and the fact that half of the housing in Gaza has been destroyed show that these are, at best, negligent actions by the Israelis, that they are indiscriminate and that the results are atrocious.

I visited Gaza just after Operation Cast Lead; I have seen what an Israeli ground invasion means. I saw white phosphorus on the ground, I saw hospitals that had been shelled and I saw families who had lost multiple members through bombing. And I also saw the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Therefore, I say to the Minister that when he responds to the debate, he needs to deal with these issues, including the need for a ceasefire, and he must come up with a more credible response on behalf of the UK Government, because at the moment all we are seeing is multiple deaths of civilians happening on a daily basis.

6.2 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): Blackburn is in the top 10 for the number of signatories to two of the three petitions that we are debating this afternoon. In the short time available to me, I will speak to the core concern of the three petitions.

First, on the question of the UK's neutrality, international law states that nations have the right to self-defence, but it also dictates that this right must be exercised proportionately. I am sure that future investigations will determine whether that is what is happening in Gaza today.

On 7 October, it was a dark day and I absolutely condemn the horrific terror attack carried out by Hamas. It left 1,200 Israeli people dead, and they were killed in such an horrendous manner, as has been described by the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), who is no longer in his place. However, please remember that Hamas are not the Palestinian people; Hamas are not the innocent women and children who are suffering today.

Richard Foord: Will the hon. Member give way?

Kate Hollern: I will make a bit of progress first.

The terrible crime does not justify the collective punishment of millions. According to the Gaza Health Ministry, around 18,000 Palestinians have now been killed. It is estimated that about 70% of them are women and children. While such deaths are occurring on a daily basis, the UK Government abstained in the votes on last week's United Nations resolutions, which called for a ceasefire. They claim it will not happen: "Why call for it? It won't happen." Doing difficult things is what this Government should do. They say that it is too difficult to do things; they are taking the easy option. But we cannot stand by and watch the horrors we are witnessing every day.

Thousands of people have been left without sufficient food and water, and hospitals are on the verge of total shutdown as fuel runs out. Patients are undergoing surgery with no pain relief. Aid agencies continue to warn that the humanitarian disaster in Gaza is worsening by the minute. Some 2.3 million people are homeless and trapped in a tiny, embattled enclave with little food, water or medical attention.

[Kate Hollern]

Finally, on the ceasefire, I believe that the only way forward is an immediate ceasefire that is binding on all sides. It is for that reason that I voted for amendment (h) to the King's Speech: I could not, in good conscience, have done anything else.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I associate myself with her remarks calling for an immediate ceasefire—that is absolutely essential. Does she agree with Amnesty International, which is urging the UK Government to call on Israel to end its 16-year long illegal blockade of Gaza, starting by immediately suspending its recent increased restrictions on food, fuel, electricity and water, which is collective punishment amounting to a war crime?

Kate Hollern: I agree entirely. We must remember that this situation did not start on 7 October.

International calls for a ceasefire are numerous; they are coming from all over the world, apart from the US and the UK, and they will continue to grow. Yesterday, the World Health Organisation executive board adopted a resolution aimed at addressing the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza and again called for a ceasefire. Some 76% of the UK public support a ceasefire. Why are this Government not listening?

We have now had some humanitarian pauses, which were welcome, but a brief respite and the release of more than 100 hostages and 240 Palestinians in detention are insufficient. It is regrettable that world leaders failed to use the time to broker a permanent ceasefire. The only solution is a diplomatically negotiated one: a two-state solution that comprises a secure Israel and a sovereign Palestine is the only way to secure lasting peace.

Richard Foord: I echo the hon. Member's calls for a two-state solution. Does she agree that it is outrageous for a senior Israeli official to reckon that one third of those killed so far in the war were combatants, because by deduction that would mean that two thirds of those killed—more than 10,000 people—must be civilians, and that we cannot dismiss those civilian deaths as mere collateral damage?

Kate Hollern: Absolutely. As I said earlier, I am quite sure that a future investigation will expose some of the information being released.

I appreciate that a negotiated ceasefire that is binding on all sides—that is the important part—will be difficult and a huge diplomatic task, but sitting on our hands will not achieve anything. The situation is growing worse by the day, and as the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) said earlier, we have a breeding ground for the future of Hamas unless we do something. We start by talking, we start by listening, and we start by putting pressure on people to stop bombing innocent women and children.

6.8 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I rise to speak on the petitions before us today in no particular order, but I do not think that anyone inside or outside this Chamber would disagree with e-petition 648383,

which calls on the Government to urge the Israeli Government to allow fuel, electricity and food into Gaza. The fact that aid has started is welcome, but it is nowhere near enough; we all appreciate that fact. However, I do not rise in support of e-petition 648292, which calls on the Government to seek a ceasefire. I find myself in a very unusual position, in that I will quote someone who I never thought I would quote, and that is Bernie Sanders. Over the weekend, he said:

“In terms of a permanent ceasefire, I don't know how you can have a permanent ceasefire with Hamas, who has said before October 7 and after October 7 that they want to destroy Israel. They want a permanent war. I don't know how you have a permanent ceasefire with an attitude like that...I think Israel has the right to defend itself”

if it goes after Hamas, but not after the Palestinian people. Those are very powerful words, with which, again, I think everyone would agree.

We have had a ceasefire previously. In fact, we had a humanitarian pause just recently, which ended on 1 December. That broke down because Hamas broke the terms of that truce. They started trying to dictate which hostages would be released, and then they began again to fire rockets indiscriminately towards residential areas of Israel—itsself a war crime. If a temporary truce cannot hold, what chance is there of a permanent ceasefire?

We have an important duty in this place. I have a lot of sympathy with those calling for a ceasefire—who could see bodies being dragged out of rubble and not want that to stop? Everyone with any shred of dignity would want that. However, is that realistic? I do not think so. The pogrom of 7 October—I call it a pogrom because that is what it was—and the sheer scale of the attack that day shook the world. It shook my constituents, who have family members and friends who were not only taken hostage but killed that day—family members such as Vivian Silver, whose cousins I sat and spoke to when I was in shul at the Shrubberies, and again in Whitefield. Her cousins thought she had been taken hostage. The attack was so brutal that her body was not identified until 14 November, more than a month and a half after she was murdered. It took that long to be able to identify her remains and show she had been murdered by Hamas.

I stand with my constituents in saying that calling for a ceasefire is not the right call to make. I have gone to many shuls, spoken at many vigils and spoken to many of my constituents, and they agree. Like you, Mr McCabe, I was at Kibbutz Kfar Aza earlier this year; the tranquillity of that location is now permanently broken. As you will know, our tour guide lost pretty much her entire family that day. Her parents were murdered, and her little brother survived only by hiding under the dead bodies of his parents for seven hours. That is the barbarity—the animal nature—that we are facing.

Hamas do not care about peace. As has been said already, they say in their charter they want to wipe Jewish people off the face of the earth. But it is not just Hamas; Hezbollah in the north and Iran in the middle east are destabilising the entire region. We need to speak more about what we are doing with Iran. I make a plea again to the Minister: as has been said throughout this year and beforehand, now is the time to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety, because it is Iran that is getting these weapons to Hamas in Gaza.

There are many questions as to what is going on in Gaza. There is a terror tunnel network—that cannot be denied. We have seen the footage; we have seen the blast doors; we have seen the fire holes. It is not set up for normal transport around Gaza, but to support terror activities. That is why Israel has the right to defend itself by going after Hamas: to make sure no attacks like that can take place ever again. On 1 November, Ghazi Hamad, a senior member of Hamas, told Lebanese television that Hamas would repeat the attacks of 7 October “a second time and a third time”,

and keep on repeating those attacks until there is no Israel. That is why I cannot support a ceasefire.

6.13 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) on so eloquently introducing this debate, and I, too, congratulate the petitioners on organising a petition with so much support across the country, including across my constituency. Thousands of my constituents have signed these petitions, and thousands more have written to me to express their feelings about the appalling violence they see unfolding in Gaza.

In almost every one of the getting on for 6,000 emails I have received, there has been unequivocal condemnation of the violence, attacks and brutality perpetrated by the terrorists of Hamas on 7 October: the indiscriminate slaughter of 1,200 people in Israel—it was indeed a pogrom—the rockets indiscriminately fired by Hamas; the indiscriminate hostage taking. My constituents, like the constituents of so many hon. Members here today, have watched in horror at the destruction that has now cost the lives of 18,000 people in Gaza, that has now injured 50,000 people in Gaza and that has now rendered Gaza the most dangerous place on earth to be a civilian. Some 2.2 million people are now in desperate need of food assistance.

UNRWA—the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which we helped to create all those years ago to bring respite to the people of Gaza and the west bank—now calls Gaza “hell on earth”. The World Food Programme is now very clear:

“With just a fraction of the needed food supplies coming in, a fatal absence of fuel, interruptions to communications systems and no security for our staff...we cannot do our job.”

The World Food Programme—a food programme created by the world to feed those in need—is now saying clearly to us that it can no longer do its job.

Oxfam is also now clear that the safe zones are, in its words,

“a mirage: unprotected, not agreed...beyond Gaza itself”.

It fears that people will be forced out of Gaza for the last time, and that the aid agencies will be forced into the devil’s own choice of providing aid while collaborating with that evacuation of people from Gaza.

When we have violence that extreme, surely what we should be doing across this House is arguing for a binding-on-all-sides ceasefire, arguing for peace, and arguing for negotiations. Instead, our Government went to the United Nations, days before we celebrated the anniversary of the UN declaration of human rights, and abstained on a question of moral force and justice. That motion itself was triggered by the United Nations Secretary-General—not a nobody—using emergency

provisions, because he warned that the humanitarian aid system was at “risk of collapse”. That is how bad it had become.

In a situation like that, it was the wrong call to abstain on that UN Security Council vote. We should have voted for a ceasefire. We should have voted with almost every other member of the Security Council and sent a message of peace, of negotiations and of a binding-on-all-sides ceasefire, not least because such a vote would not have been without precedent.

I was a member of the Cabinet in 2009 when we voted for Security Council resolution 1860. Despite United States opposition, that called for a ceasefire in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. We must be honest; it was not immediately successful, but it changed the terms of the debate on the ground. It laid the groundwork for the peace that eventually came. That is what it means to use our weight in the international institutions of which the UK is a member to make the case for peace—to make the case for a permanent ceasefire.

I therefore hope that the Minister will be able to explain, when he rises to his feet: if not now, then when? How many more people will die before the United Kingdom does the right thing and votes for peace, votes for negotiations and, yes, votes for a ceasefire?

6.19 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Mr McCabe. The petitions that we are debating today reflect the deep anguish that so many people are experiencing as we see the images from the horrific conflict in the middle east on our phones and TV screens. The attack by Hamas on 7 October was an utterly horrific outrage, the biggest terror attack since 9/11 and the largest killing of Jewish people since the holocaust. We stand with Israeli citizens in their pain and trauma, in condemnation of Hamas, in the call for all hostages to be released, and in the desire never again to experience such horror.

But since 7 October we have seen an unprecedented killing of civilians in Gaza. More Palestinians have been killed in the past two months than in the previous 75 years of the existence of the state of Israel. More civilians have been killed in this conflict than have been killed by Russia during the war in Ukraine.

All conflicts are constrained by international law, which requires proportionality and the protection of civilians. International law also confers strict obligations on Israel as an occupying power. It is clear from many testimonies coming out of Gaza that Israel’s response to the horror of 7 October has not been proportionate, and that civilians have not been protected. In addition to the thousands of Palestinian civilians who have been killed in the violence, a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Gaza due to the destruction of critical infrastructure and the lack of access to deliver aid at scale. Civilians are dying due to a lack of medicine, food and water, and there is an imminent risk of deadly disease.

The UK Government say, repeatedly and correctly, that the Israeli Government must act within international law. In the face of the unfolding and unrelenting horror in Gaza, the killing of civilians, the displacement of a majority of the population, and the humanitarian catastrophe, my first question is: what action will the

[Helen Hayes]

UK Government take when the Israeli Government are so plainly not acting within international law? It appears that the UK Government's approach has been to avoid criticism of Israel in public and to seek to exert pressure in private. But that is clearly not yielding results.

The track record of the Israeli Government in previous conflicts in Gaza is clear: they will stop the violence when the international pressure gets too much. When the Israeli Government will not respond to private pressure, the time has come to say publicly what so many people can see in front of their eyes: the conflict in Gaza must stop, because the killing of so many innocent civilians is unacceptable, and illegal in international law. We must call for a ceasefire, because the current situation simply cannot continue, and we must work to ensure that the next ceasefire becomes permanent.

However, we must also turn our attention to the question of how peace can be established in this region. Just as it is clear that the human cost of the current Israeli military strategy is unacceptable, it is also clear that this strategy cannot and will not succeed in creating a context for peace. Support for the Israeli people's desire to live in peace and security requires the Israeli Government to be challenged on their current military strategy, which is of such unrelenting ferocity that it can only fuel more hatred. The violence must stop, and the ground must be laid for a political strategy for the defeat of Hamas—a political process for the realisation of a two-state solution, where a safe and secure Israel lives alongside a sovereign Palestine. Hamas will not be defeated militarily unless there is a credible plan to win peace.

The Israeli Government's current actions in Gaza are creating a traumatised generation of Gazans and teaching them that there is no peaceful co-existence with Israel. It is also important that the Israeli Government are challenged on the inflammatory and unacceptable rhetoric of some of their Ministers, who have referred to Gazans as animals and called for population transfers—ethnic cleansing by another name. The cause of peace cannot be advanced while such statements go unchallenged. Can the Minister say why the UK Government have not contradicted those statements or sanctioned those responsible?

The Palestinian people need to understand that there is a broad coalition of countries and leaders that support them in their desire for peace and self-determination and that are willing to challenge the actions of the Israeli Government in Gaza and the west bank, including illegal settlements and settler violence, which are designed to undermine the two-state solution. Why have the UK Government not followed the US in taking visa action against the leaders of illegal settlements and participants in settler violence? What are the UK Government doing to assess the legality of IDF action in Gaza? What is being said to the Israeli Government about the conditionality of future arms exports? What are the UK Government doing to build a consensus that describes a concrete alternative with other key countries, including France, Germany, the Gulf states and Egypt, and how many of those countries has the Prime Minister spoken to since the war restarted?

Palestinians and Israelis need to see that the two-state solution is more than simply words: it is a reality that can be achieved, because there is a genuine commitment to work for it across the international community. They need a ceasefire now.

6.24 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. All nations have the right to self-defence, but it is vital that they do so in accordance with their responsibilities under international law. It is incumbent on all countries to ensure that wherever conflict is taking place, international human rights law is upheld. In the week of the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the universal declaration of human rights, those obligations are of particular resonance.

The civilian population of Gaza, about half of whom are under the age of 18, bears no responsibility for the atrocities committed by Hamas on 7 October—for neither the 1,200 Israelis who were murdered nor the approximately 240 kidnapped. These are appalling war crimes that were perpetrated by Hamas, and yet it is Palestinian civilians—most of all the young, the ill and the elderly—who are being forced to pay the price, as a result of the unrelenting bombardment and siege of Gaza.

According to the United Nations, more than 17,000 people have been killed since 7 October and approximately 1.9 million people in Gaza—about 85% of the population—have been displaced and made homeless. The scale of this humanitarian crisis has been described by the chief of Oxfam GB as the worst that he has ever witnessed. The spectre of death, disease and hunger loom.

At a time when it is needed most desperately, even the right to healthcare is under attack, as the UN special rapporteur on the right to health has warned, with at least 364 attacks on healthcare facilities having been recorded by 7 December, resulting in at least 553 deaths. Communicable diseases, including respiratory illnesses and diarrhoea, are spreading fast, in a grave situation that will only grow worse as the winter progresses.

Confronted by a humanitarian catastrophe on that scale, the United Kingdom has a moral obligation to demonstrate political leadership and press for an immediate ceasefire and for the beginning of a political process aimed at securing a lasting and equitable peace for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Only an enduring ceasefire—not a humanitarian pause, and not the unilateral designation of patches of land without adequate infrastructure, food, water, healthcare or hygiene as “safe zones”—can ensure that aid workers can access those in need and allow humanitarian assistance to be delivered at the pace and scale that is so desperately needed. The polite appeals that we have heard from the Government that civilian casualties be minimised are simply not enough. What we need to see now from the Government is the clear and unequivocal message that the human suffering that we are witnessing in Gaza cannot and must not continue.

I regret that that a family emergency precluded me from being in Parliament to vote for the SNP's amendment to the motion on the King's Speech advocating for a ceasefire. I am concerned that the British Government continue to fail to lend their voice to the growing chorus across the international community calling for a ceasefire now. The decision not to join our ally France in voting

for the motion calling for a ceasefire, which was recently brought before the UN Security Council, was a profound diplomatic and moral failing and a betrayal of our responsibilities towards the people of Gaza.

Such responsibilities extend also to considering what role the UK might play in supplying the Israeli Defence Forces during the current conflict. This is not a moral obligation, but a legal one, as Lord Cameron recognised in 2014 when, as Prime Minister, his Government undertook a review of licensed exports to Israel and warned that, should significant hostilities in Gaza recommence, they would suspend existing licences for components that could be used by the Israeli Defence Forces. Now, as then, the Government should suspend all existing licences to Israel while they assess whether their exports to Israel are compliant with their obligations under the arms trade treaty and whether there is a clear risk of UK arms licensed to Israel being used in contravention of the strategic export licensing criteria.

We stand at a critical juncture for the future of millions of Palestinians and Israelis, as well as for the wider region. Now more than ever, the UK must recognise its moral duty towards those who are trapped amid the devastation being visited on Gaza and do everything within its power to secure an end to the violence.

6.29 pm

Claudia Webbe (Leicester East) (Ind): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr McCabe. I thank the thousands of petitioners who have called for this debate.

The latest estimates say that Israel's bombardment of Gaza has destroyed or severely damaged 60% to 70% of buildings and homes in northern Gaza, and now many more in southern Gaza. The terrifying toll of innocent deaths continues to rise, with at least 10,000 children killed, according to Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor. Many thousands more have been injured, maimed or forced to undergo operations without anaesthetic. I am comforting too many constituents in Leicester East who have lost family members and loved ones under the rubble. I have received over 6,400 items of correspondence from constituents calling for a ceasefire.

The toll from bombs and missiles is appalling, but the desperate crisis of starvation and disease is set to be even worse. Yet today the Israeli Government have blamed the United Nations for not doing enough to deliver aid to the people of Gaza, claiming with unabashed arrogance that

“the aid is there, and the people need it.”

The UN has pointed out in response that aid at the border is held up by Israeli checks and that UN staff are unable to get aid to the people or even to get to the Rafah crossing, because of the intensity of hostilities. The UN has already lost more than 150 of its people to Israeli bombs and shells, and it is short of trucks to carry supplies because so many trucks have been destroyed. It has added that even if aid could travel freely, Israel's Government are only allowing in about a fifth per day of what Gaza needs, intensifying the suffering and starvation and the diseases that result.

Last week, we saw the Israeli Government planting Israel's flags in the middle of flattened residential districts, suggesting that their aims in Gaza go further than simply destroying Hamas. We are hearing Israeli Government

Ministers mockingly calling this horror “Nakba 2023”, and even suggesting dropping a nuclear bomb on Gaza, while Israeli Government Departments are discussing plans to push Gazans into a tent city in the Egyptian desert in Sinai, and yet our Government continue to describe this unrestrained assault and siege as

“Israel's...right to defend itself”,

even in their response to the petitions we are discussing today.

Last week, we saw the shameful spectacle of the UK being the only member of the UN Security Council to abstain on the motion for a ceasefire in Gaza. The scale of the bombardment of Gaza and the loss of civilian life require immediate action. I will not be an accomplice. Collective punishment is a war crime. Forcible transfer is a war crime. Denying food, water and electricity is a war crime. The bombing of refugee camps, schools and hospitals is a war crime. Consequently, along with other parliamentarians worldwide and members of civil society, I have signed a petition asking the International Criminal Court to investigate and prosecute war crimes by Israel. The international initiative Justice for Gaza calls on the International Criminal Court to investigate and prosecute the Israeli Government for crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The question is why the UK Government are not even participating in the collective call for evidence that was issued by the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. If it wishes to count itself as a civilised nation, the UK can no longer sit on its hands while Gaza is starved, massacred and bombed. The atrocities that happened in Israel on 7 October and Israel's trauma cannot be a free pass to indiscriminately kill and bomb innocent civilians in Gaza.

How many more must die? I am asking the Government to advise in detail what concrete steps they are taking to bring about an urgent end to hostilities. What do they know about Israel's ultimate goals in Gaza? In particular, what steps are they taking to pressure the Israeli Government to stop bombing civilians and destroying vital infrastructure? What are they doing to call for a permanent, lasting ceasefire? Just saying that the Government are calling on Israel to minimise casualties simply will not wash, when it is clear to all that there is no restraint and that many thousands more will die if things continue as they are.

6.34 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Thank you for allowing me to speak in this debate, Mr McCabe. I congratulate those who put forward the petitions that enabled it.

Let me start by stating, as all of us in this Chamber have done, that I absolutely abhor the violence of 7 October, which was perpetrated on unarmed civilians in the various kibbutzim and at the music festival. It was shocking; 1,200 people were killed and 200 hostages were taken. It was not just the killing that was so disgusting, but the maiming and mutilation of women, children and men. But in meeting violence with violence, the response from Israel and the IDF has, I think, been utterly disproportionate and remains, for sure, a concern worldwide.

We have seen the various motions put forward by the United Nations Security Council and the Secretary-General recognising that this is intolerable and that we need to

[*Matt Western*]

bring the sides together and strive for peace, because what we are witnessing is not a conflict where the asymmetry of the conflict is so considerable. We were promised a conflict of precision and intelligence in routing out Hamas, but what we are actually seeing is the indiscriminate loss of civilian lives: women, children and men. As so many colleagues have described, the scenes are so horrifying. It is very difficult for many of us worldwide to watch these scenes on our TVs, listen on the radio and see on social media the scale of the devastation and the loss of life.

I really had believed, and I do wish to believe, that Israel wishes to secure the three Hamas leaders, but the way it is going about it seems to be utterly inappropriate. The only way in which this will be brought to a resolution is through political negotiation and through targeted military action, but the fact that this is now spreading into more activity in the west bank, with even greater numbers of illegal settlements, must concern all of us, not just in the region but around the world.

I do live in some hope. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) recalled resolution 1860 (2009)—how it was brought about, how the UK was able to act, the leadership it showed and the influence it was able to have on our long-term ally the US, which abstained in that particular vote but brought about the necessary ceasefire a week later. We need to see peace in the region and a stable, secure Israel, but the only way we are ever going to achieve that is with a stable, secure Palestine as well. For too long, nations and politicians in this place have ignored the plight of that region. We have to bring focus urgently to that part of the world to bring about a permanent peace, a permanent secure, stable Palestine and a secure Israel.

Steve McCabe (in the Chair): We seem to have come to the end of our supply of speakers a little earlier than anticipated, so I will now call the Front Benchers.

6.39 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is good to see you in your place, Mr McCabe. It is a privilege to sum up for the SNP in this debate. I pay tribute to some really excellent contributions from colleagues across the House, but I have to say that I do so with a sense of deep sadness. All of us feel this personally. We are all of us connected to this patch of land. Israel and Palestine combined are smaller than the Strathclyde Regional Council area was, and yet the geopolitical implications and the links that the area has to communities worldwide and across all our islands are significant.

I feel it personally, too. I grew up in Saudi Arabia and, with my family, spent much of the '80s in Riyadh. My folks have just retired, back from Kuwait. In the European Parliament, I was a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and served in the middle east working group. I have been back and forth to the region—Gaza, the west bank and Israel—many times, and I count myself a friend of all innocents. I count myself a friend of Israel and Palestine. I have never seen it as bad as I see it now; I have never felt more bleak and frankly more fearful for the future, not just in the region but in our communities, given the connections that we have to it.

The SNP's position, on this as on all matters, is that international law has to be applied in all cases and in all circumstances. Our position is principled neutrality. We believe in a two-state solution, much as that is an increasingly forlorn hope, especially right now. We support all innocents. We condemn all violence. Having been back and forth to the region many times, I am well aware that each society is complex and each society is complicated, and I want to see the innocent protected in all societies.

We share the pain of everyone, but what we have seen too much of over the past few months is people minimising others' pain and legitimising ongoing violence on the basis of pain inculcated into their own communities over many decades. We heard powerful testimony about how dreadful the 7 October attacks were. Of course they were—they absolutely were—but history did not start on 7 October, and to minimise anyone's pain is not to help a just solution.

Some facts, because it is worth agreeing on some facts: Israel has a right to exist; it has a right to exist within its borders; it has a right to defend itself, proportionately; Hamas are a terrible organisation, a terrorist organisation; the 7 October attacks were barbarism that we unreservedly condemn. But the response to those attacks is redrawing the map of the middle east before our very eyes, and yet again the Palestinian people have been comprehensively let down by the international community.

I fear that what is happening now is going to fuel extremism. It is going to fuel antisemitism and Islamophobia—it is possible to be equally concerned about the rise of both, in all our communities. I fear that the events in the middle east right now could create real problems within our own societies, across the whole of Europe and indeed the world.

In our Committees, we have seen a huge interest from the public, as seen by the response to the petitions: "Remain neutral in Israel-Palestine conflict and withdraw support for Israel", "Seek a ceasefire and to end Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip" and "Urge the Israel Government to allow fuel, electricity and food into Gaza". The SNP supports all those petitions. We believe that they would go towards a just peace.

We are very proud of the role that we played in the King's Speech debate in forcing the House to a vote on an amendment on the need for a ceasefire, because we believe we need a ceasefire. I appreciate that others disagree, but surely peace has to be built on a cessation of hostilities. I take all the points about Hamas. I am a gay man; Hamas throw people like me off high buildings. I carry no torch for anyone within this conflict, but surely peace has to be based on a ceasefire and a dialogue.

We lost that vote on the King's Speech, which I regret—I pay tribute to all colleagues who supported it—but we will not give up. We have heard a number of references to the 2009 precedent that in supporting UN Security Council resolution 1860 on ending Operation Cast Lead, the UK was influential, with the European Union, in changing the US position. It was influential on changing the reality on the ground. It was influential in creating peace.

We need that again. We need it again because the Israeli Government are going in entirely the wrong direction. The Israeli Government are acting with what

seems to be impunity. They are funnelling cash into new settlements right now. We see that happening, and I fear that the long-term consequences will be utterly unsustainable and will undermine any possibility of a just peace.

Andrew Percy: The hon. Gentleman is making a relatively even-handed speech and I would not quite say that I disagree, but as he knows, the consequence of previous ceasefires was the continued building up of the terror network in Gaza and the continued aiming of thousands of rockets, each one of them aimed at civilians. The consequence was the much greater murder of innocents that we saw on 7 October. I understand that the hon. Gentleman is genuine in his desire for a ceasefire, but what is his policy for how we rid Hamas—who we all hate equally, I hope—from the governance of the Gaza strip?

Alyn Smith: The hon. Gentleman makes an important intervention. I agree that we need to rid the region of Hamas for the benefit of the Palestinians in Gaza as well as the wider region, but I do not see that there is a military answer to that, and I do not see the military campaign as being that successful in its eradication, frankly. What we are seeing is disproportionate attacks on civilians. Particularly in northern Gaza but increasingly in the south, we are seeing any prospect of a viable two-state solution or a viable community for people to go back to being ruined. That is targeting, perhaps indirectly, the civilians in the region. That fuels the conditions in which Hamas prosper and makes it easier for Hamas to continue. So we disagree on that: I think a ceasefire has to happen in order to allow talks—however difficult, however painful—to progress, because Hamas are not going away.

We need to go further than a ceasefire. I will make a couple of points to the Minister, who knows I have much respect for him. We need, surely, to focus more on accountability in the long term. We are seeing individuals—non-state actors or otherwise—acting with what seems to be a lack of accountability. We surely need to support the International Criminal Court's investigation and its call for evidence. The UK is in a position to be particularly influential within that. We are seeing war crimes, and war crimes need to be properly investigated by proper authorities. I do not think that politicians ourselves should shoot from the hip on such matters, but we need a proper investigation by the proper authorities, and that needs to be supported by the UK, surely.

We need to see a greater focus on the proxy violence by settlers in the west bank and Jerusalem, because we are seeing the map of the middle east being redrawn before our eyes. The prospect of a two-state solution is being utterly undermined by the policies of the Israeli Government right now, today. That has to stop, and there must be accountability for it. The map is being redrawn, and that surely has to result in consequences in law. We also—this is another point for the Minister—need to stop aiding Israel in its military action, because to my mind there is sufficient and genuine concern about matériel supplied being misused against civilians, however indirectly or accidentally. Surely there is sufficient concern that in order to help a peace, the UK should stop supplying logistical and surveillance support to the state of Israel and its actions, because they are disproportionate.

I do believe that a just peace is possible. I do believe that the eastern Mediterranean could be paradise, but it has been blighted by the legacy of empire and blighted by corruption, religious politics, political religion and all sorts of other issues. What we are seeing right now is going to have great consequence for our communities into the future, and for the region. We should support peace. We should support a ceasefire. If the Minister is looking to work on that, I will back him all the way.

6.48 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr McCabe.

No one can doubt the gravity of the situation in Gaza. Despite what we see on our television screens night after night, we cannot begin to understand the horror for the people of Gaza, who live through this terror day in, day out. It is particularly moving and distressing to see so many children who have lost their lives and are being injured in such a terrible way.

Equally, no one can doubt the sincerity of the people of this country who share our emotions and who decided to sign the petitions in such great numbers—many thousands of people. I have also been extremely moved by the contributions that we have heard from Members today. We have heard a number of genuine and heartfelt contributions; if there is a commonality between them, it is that our shared view is that the killing and horror must stop as quickly as humanly possible. The question is: what would our intervention be most effective in doing, and what form should that intervention take?

A number of people have said that we should be arguing for a ceasefire from both parties as quickly as possible. I can understand the sentiment behind that, because we all want to stop the killing, but it is important to bear in mind that if we are to have a genuine ceasefire, it needs both warring parties to agree to that. Unfortunately, there is little indication that that would be the case.

That is why, personally, I believe very strongly that we must argue for a meaningful cessation of violence. It has happened on one occasion; sadly, it did not continue, but I still think it is worth making the case for that, because that will save lives and will hopefully move us towards a situation in which we could have a genuine, long-lasting peace. It is also important to recognise that that momentary pause saw the release of a number of hostages. That is something that we must never forget. It was extremely important for those families who were concerned about those hostages, who were being held in the most appalling conditions and were being treated badly, it seems. That must be foremost in our minds as well.

A further meaningful cessation of violence would allow the real relief that is desperately needed to come into Gaza in a meaningful way. We had some short respite, but that is obviously nowhere near enough. We must place the emphasis on what is desperately needed by so many people there: more food, more water, more medicines and, critically, more fuel.

It is so important that we do not lock ourselves into seemingly esoteric discussions about what words or phrases we use. We must do everything we humanly can to make life easier for the people of Gaza. In a very practical sense, there is also a need for our Government

[Wayne David]

and all Governments to argue for more relief routes into Gaza. I strongly urge the Government to make forceful representations, if they are not currently making them already, for the Kerem Shalom crossing to be opened by the Israeli Government as quickly as possible.

I want to make a few broader points as well. Inevitably, and quite rightly perhaps, our focus is on the situation in Gaza. Let us not forget what is happening in the west bank as well. Since 7 October, we have seen an increase in settler violence, we have seen some 300 attacks by illegal settlers, and we have seen 250 Palestinian people killed, as well as four Israelis. It is extremely important to recognise in this situation that those settlements—which have taken place, are currently expanding, and it seems being given more funds by the Israeli Government—should not be there. They are illegal settlements.

Today, at least, we should be saying that there should be no increase in those settlements. Hopefully, we can move to a situation where there are no such settlements in a future Palestinian state. It is also important that we note what the United States of America has been saying and doing, and I take note of what my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said regarding action on visas. I think it is very important that the United Kingdom does exactly the same as the United States.

Matt Western: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. On the point on the illegal settlements, does he share a concern that this current conflict is potentially being exploited by certain factions within the coalition Government to pursue a particular ideology, and to actually accelerate that programme of illegal settlement in the pursuit of the eradication of Palestine as once imagined?

Wayne David: My hon. Friend makes a very good point indeed. It is very important that if we are going to move towards a two-state solution—I will say a little bit more about that in the future—it is necessary for us to recognise that political change and moderation is needed on both sides. We cannot have a situation where Hamas are seen to be the dominant Palestinian voice—they are not, incidentally, but many people believe that to be the case—when they want the destruction of the state of Israel.

We have to make sure we have strong connections with, and give support to, more reasonable Palestinian people who want to have a compromise with Israel and a two-state solution; but that applies equally to Israel as well. Unfortunately, Netanyahu is on record as being against a two-state solution, and there are elements in his war cabinet who want to see the encroachment of Israeli settlers into much of the west bank—some people have even suggested into Gaza as well.

It is extremely important that the international community begins to think about those issues, and begins to work towards a consensus on what needs to be achieved in the future. That is very important for ensuring we have a longer-term perspective, even in these dark days of conflict.

Andrew Percy: I am the only Conservative Member on this side of the Chamber, so hopefully I can be indulged a little. I hope the hon. Gentleman was not

trying to draw any equivalence between democratically elected politicians in Israel—whether we agree with them or not—and desire for political change involving Hamas. On that point, would he share my concern that while we all want to see increased co-operation, Palestinian pollsters the Arab World for Research and Development—that is based in Ramallah, and I have met with its staff—show that, I think, 83% of Palestinians across the west bank currently reject co-existence with Israel, and 75% of them support the attacks of 7 October. How are we going to affect that political change when the views on the other side seem so intransigent on the issue?

Wayne David: First, I do recognise that Israel is a democratic state, but at the same time I recognise that a minority of politicians—albeit duly elected—do not articulate what is the view of most Israeli people; that is why it is important for us to stress moderation. I am someone who has been to both the west bank and Israel, and I strongly believe that the vast majority of everyone I met wants peace, and to live together in peaceful co-existence. It is our duty to work towards that, and to make sure they have the context in which they can work out that long-term peaceful settlement.

I want to say something about looking to the future. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) made a very good point when she stressed the importance of international humanitarian law—it is absolutely essential. We cannot be in a situation where we pick and choose which international laws we like; they must apply to everyone in all situations. It is incumbent on us as an international community, and as a country that upholds international law, to make sure that the International Criminal Court is able to look into the conduct of this conflict by all sides and come to some very firm conclusions that must influence our politics in the future.

It is also important that the Government play a very proactive role in the future of the middle east. I might be wrong, but I get the impression that over the last few years our Government have tended to downgrade the importance of their engagement with the middle east—that needs to change. There needs to be far greater emphasis, consistency and real commitment from the Government, and I hope we will see that in the future. It is important we see that in the near future, because once this conflict is over what we cannot see is another Nakba occurring. We cannot see the population of Gaza being forced into Egypt: that is totally unacceptable. That is why I want a meaningful cessation of hostilities, so that we can begin to talk materially about these issues. I want to see Gaza being rebuilt, which will require greater investment by the international community. It will mean Britain and others working with the Arab states to make sure that there is sufficient investment and security, both for Palestinians and for Israelis, as soon as the conflict is over.

My final point is that it is very important that in this difficult situation we hold out a clear vision for the future, and it is also very important that that future must rest on a two-state solution. To achieve that, we need to have hope; we need to have hope that it is better for people to live together than to engage in perpetual conflict. The choice for the international community is very clear. One possibility is pretending that, once the conflict is over, “There you are, we can pack our bags,

forget about it and go on to the next conflict.” We cannot do that. We must learn the lesson of history, which is that if the international community, working with everybody in the region, does not do its level best to make sure that there is a two-state solution, this terrible conflict will be replicated in 20 years’ time, another 20 years after that and so on.

We have to make sure that the issue is addressed in a systematic and coherent way. I very much hope that the Government share that perspective and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to this debate.

7.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): I am grateful to the Petitions Committee for allowing this important debate and to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who has led it. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), is engaged elsewhere in his parliamentary duties, so I am delighted to be able to respond to the debate today. I am also grateful to Members for their powerful and sincere contributions to the debate from across the Chamber this afternoon.

Of course we are all very clear, as has been described at length and in moving detail this afternoon, that a profound tragedy is unfolding in the middle east. Israel has suffered the worst terror attack in its history and in Gaza, too many civilians are dying in this major humanitarian crisis. This afternoon, we have heard moving testimony about some of the tragedies on all sides.

The hostage release deal, which began in late November, offered a desperately needed moment of hope and respite, and we will continue to press at the UN and directly with Israel for unhindered humanitarian access and further substantive and repeated humanitarian pauses.

The brutal attack on 7 October included the murder of more than 1,200 people and the Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza has reported that more than 18,000 civilians are dead in Gaza. Fifteen British nationals have lost their lives and a small number of other British nationals have been taken hostage. More than 100 hostages continue to be held in Gaza, where three quarters of the population have been displaced.

Of course the UK Government have made it clear that Israel has the right to defend itself, to free the hostages and to ensure that such an attack can never happen again. At the same time, Israel must comply with international humanitarian law and take every possible precaution to minimise harm to civilians.

On Hamas, we have made our position plain. Hamas can have no future in Gaza after their appalling terrorist attacks. They pose a fundamental challenge to the very idea of an Israeli state. So, Hamas must release all hostages, stop endangering the lives of Palestinians and lay down their arms.

Let me turn now to the three petitions that we are debating today. First, on the call for neutrality, we support Israel’s legitimate right to defend itself and to take action against terrorism. Hamas terrorists have brutally murdered, raped, kidnapped and maimed ordinary civilians in Israel, and callously put civilians in Gaza at risk.

The Hamas campaign has not stopped since 7 October. Hamas have fired hundreds of rockets and publicly repeated their desire to destroy the Israeli state. Hamas does not speak or act in the interests of the Palestinian people.

As the Prime Minister has said, we stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people. We continue to urge Israel to ensure that its campaign targets Hamas fighters and military objectives. It is vital that all parties ensure that their actions comply with international humanitarian law and that they take every possible step to minimise harm to civilians.

Helen Hayes: The Minister says that the UK Government urge the Israeli Government to undertake targeted strikes and protect civilians. What will the UK Government do next when it is plain for all to see that civilians in Gaza are not being protected and the strikes are not as targeted as they should be?

Leo Docherty: As I have already stated and will state again, it is vital that all sides comply with international humanitarian law. Israel must take every possible step to minimise harm, and it is subject to international law like everyone else. It must also do more to stop settler violence and hold those responsible to account; we raised that directly with the Israeli Government. Indeed, UK Ministers, including the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, have pressed those points in all engagements with their Israeli counterparts very recently. We want to see a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state.

I turn to the petition on aid for Gaza. We continue to urge the Israeli Government to allow the immediate, unimpeded and safe access of lifesaving fuel, electricity and food. Palestinian civilians should not suffer the consequences of Hamas’s brutality. As the Foreign Secretary made clear, the agreement on 22 November to pause hostilities was a crucial step toward addressing the humanitarian emergency in Gaza. The pause provided an important opportunity for food, fuel and other lifesaving equipment to enter Gaza, including from the UK, via Egypt. The UK has provided 74 tonnes of aid to Gaza, including blankets, sleeping mats and medical provisions, which are being distributed by the United Nations. I should add that the Foreign Secretary announced an additional £30 million of humanitarian assistance on 24 November, which triples our existing aid budget for the Occupied Palestinian Territories in this financial year. Of course, that will not be enough to meet the immediate needs of the population. We have pressed Israel to open other land border crossings, such as Kerem Shalom, and we hope that that will open very soon.

We continue to work with the United Nations, the Palestine Red Crescent Society and the International Committee of the Red Cross to improve the humanitarian situation. We take seriously Israel’s concerns about the stockpiling of aid by Hamas terrorists, but that does not negate the need for such aid to reach those who need it inside Gaza. We are working with the UN to ensure that safeguards and robust processes are in place to ensure that aid is used only for humanitarian and civilian purposes.

I turn to ceasefires. As the Prime Minister has said, there is no scenario in which Hamas can be allowed to control Gaza again. That is why we are not calling for a

[*Leo Docherty*]

general ceasefire, which would allow Hamas to regroup and entrench their position. I am pleased to say that the Government's position is shared by the Opposition Front Bench. Instead, we are focused on urging respect for international law, alleviating human suffering and, hugely importantly, conflict resolution.

We remain committed to a two-state solution. Both Israelis and Palestinians have a right to live in peace and security. We agree with the United States that Gaza should ultimately be under Palestinian control, with the Palestinian Authority having a long-term role. The Prime Minister has discussed that on several occasions with President Abbas. The Foreign Secretary also discussed how to support the Palestinian Authority, including through training and capacity building, during his regional visit in November. We do not believe that the long-term presence of Israeli security forces in Gaza would be of benefit to Israelis or Palestinians. In the short term, the Government welcome November's hostage and prisoner releases and the pause in fighting, which allowed for the increased flow of fuel and aid, as I have said. We are pressing for further pauses on humanitarian grounds to get more aid in and hostages out.

I conclude by thanking the public and my fellow parliamentarians for an impassioned and sincere debate this afternoon and for their continued engagement on these critical issues.

Andy Slaughter: I will keep the Minister a little longer if he has the time. Notwithstanding that, I asked him a question: is his Department likely to sponsor a full-day debate in the main Chamber? Clearly, there is an important issue to be debated about the way Israel is conducting the war and how we achieve peace, but with the degree of settler and IDF violence in the west bank, with the settlement expansion that is going on and with UK components in arms supplies, there are also many other issues around the Israel-Gaza war that need to be debated, so will the Minister give that undertaking?

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman asks a valid question. I cannot give that assurance, because of course it is a question for the Leader of the House, but we note that question and I am sure we will relay the request to the Leader of the House and she will give it due consideration. This afternoon demonstrates that there is, understandably, a tremendous level of interest from colleagues, reflective of the profound level of interest shown by the general public.

Mick Whitley: Will the Minister tell us what discussions the Government have had over the last 13 years about a two-state solution, and when was the last time they met to discuss that matter? I ask because I do not think anyone knows, by any means, that that has taken place.

Leo Docherty: The hon. Gentleman asks a very good question, and I am pleased to confirm that the Foreign Secretary discussed that issue in the region just last month with his interlocutors.

We are seeing, across the world and in our own communities, how polarising and emotive this issue is. The Government are clear on our priorities: supporting Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas; ensuring

that Israel protects civilians in Gaza and complies with international humanitarian law; standing with the civilian population of Gaza; pressing, both at the UN and directly with Israel, for unhindered humanitarian access and further humanitarian pauses; securing the release of UK hostages; and restarting the peace process towards a two-state solution that delivers lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians.

Claudia Webbe: Will the Minister give way?

Leo Docherty: I will be delighted to give way if the hon. Lady will be very brief.

Claudia Webbe: I thank the Minister for giving way. I just want to ask whether the Government will be giving evidence in relation to the call by the International Criminal Court prosecutor—in terms of prosecuting war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Leo Docherty: The conduct of the ICC is of course a matter for the ICC, but I can reassure colleagues that the UK of course will continue to work with our partners to ensure that the vision of a peaceful middle east eventually can, one day, become a reality.

7.12 pm

Cat Smith: It is a bold thing for any citizen to do to start an e-petition on the Government's website, and I thank our petitioners for sitting through our debate today. I do not know whether they appreciated the Minister's response or perhaps have further questions for him—it is difficult to read the body language in this Chamber—but what is clear and has come across from all colleagues is that all our inboxes have been full on this issue, and it is very clear that the petitions surpassed the 100,000 mark very quickly. With 600,000 people signing the three petitions, we secured time to debate the issue in the House. That is something that was achieved by citizens in this country. Something that my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) has been attempting to secure through business questions was achieved by citizens, and that is testament to the e-petitions procedure. I would encourage anyone watching to fully engage in that process.

There are plenty of things that we can disagree on in this Chamber and in this debate, but there are some things that we can agree on. The pain, the death and the suffering on both sides is something that has touched all our hearts, and the unimaginable acts of terror that have been experienced by citizens, both Israeli and Palestinian, have definitely affected all of us. I do not believe that a military solution will ever be successful; I believe that peace is only ever won when weapons are laid down.

It is always a bit dangerous in this House to go off script a little bit, and I had not planned to say this, but something that struck me in this debate was that it is very challenging to raise a child with dual heritage. My son tonight will be lighting Hanukkah candles with his father back in Lancaster. He understands that he has a Jewish identity, and that his mother has a Christian identity. A few weeks ago, we were at a peace vigil in Lancaster with a friend of ours who is a Muslim. The three of us were holding hands, mainly because he is a five-year-old boy and has a tendency to run away, and

he looked up and said, “Mummy, you are a Christian, I’m Jewish”—sometimes he says he is Christian, but I suppose that is the challenge of having dual heritage—“and”, looking at our friend, Fabina, “you are a Muslim. Isn’t it nice that we all love each other?”

I am really saddened by what happened next. We had to leave the peace vigil because some people started chanting things that were antisemitic. It is important in this debate that we remember that regardless of our religious heritage or cultural identity, we are all citizens on this planet and we need to come together to find peace. It will be challenging and painful, and things will be said that hurt every one of us, but I hope that the

three hours we have spent in Westminster Hall today might be the start of something in this House through which we can understand the complexities of these different identities and the challenges that we will have to find peace. I hope we find that peace, Mr McCabe.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 648225, 648383 and 648292 relating to Israel and Palestine.

7.16 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 11 December 2023

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Trade Sanctions Implementation Update

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Government are announcing today that they will create a new unit—the Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation—within the Department for Business and Trade to improve the implementation and enforcement of trade sanctions.

Over the last year, the Government have implemented sanctions against Russia unprecedented in scale and scope. In total, the UK has sanctioned over £20 billion-worth of its 2021 trade in goods with Russia. We have also banned the provision of a range of professional and business services that are crucial to Russia's economy, including accounting and audit, advertising and public relations, architectural services, engineering services, management and IT consulting, and legal advisory services. The UK is a world leader in services trade, and Russia has high levels of dependence on skills and expertise from G7 countries. Our services sanctions will degrade Russia's ability to maintain, upgrade and modernise its economy over the medium term, thereby reducing the revenue available to finance its war machine.

The new Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation will play a pivotal role in ensuring that these sanctions, but also those across 23 other UK sanctions regimes such as Afghanistan, Belarus, North Korea, Iran, Lebanon and Syria, are effectively implemented and enforced.

The new unit will support businesses to comply with UK trade sanctions as well as investigate potential breaches. The Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation will have a range of civil enforcement tools, including the ability to levy monetary penalties. The Government will make regulations to provide the framework for these monetary penalties. Where the Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation investigates and potentially finds more serious breaches, it will refer these to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs or other agencies for criminal enforcement.

The Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation will be an important addition to the Government's sanctions enforcement capability. It will work closely with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which will continue to enforce trade sanctions where goods—and ancillary services—cross the border in line with its role as the UK's customs authority; with the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation in His Majesty's Treasury, which is responsible for financial sanctions as well as the oil price cap; with the Department for Transport, which leads on transport sanctions, and with the Home Office, which is responsible for immigration sanctions and for modern slavery.

The creation of the Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation is a key part of how Government are delivering the economic deterrence initiative announced as part of the refresh of the Government's integrated review, published in March this year. This funding is

from the conflict, stability and security fund, and administered by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which is responsible for overall foreign policy on the use of sanctions. It will strengthen our tools to respond to and deter hostile acts by current and future aggressors, including by building expertise across Government to design, implement and enforce sanctions for maximum impact.

Further detail on when the Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation will be operational will be shared with Parliament at a later date.

[HCWS110]

DEFENCE

Maritime Capability Coalition Launch

The Secretary of State for Defence (Grant Shapps): I am pleased to inform the House of the UK's launch of the maritime capability coalition (MCC), alongside Norway, which represents a step change in the UK's support for Ukraine in both defending against Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion and in developing Ukraine's maritime capabilities for the future.

The MCC will focus on the task of developing a Ukrainian maritime force capable of defending Ukraine's maritime flank and deterring Russia. This will require our collective effort and resource, including through the provision of training, doctrine, information, infrastructure or the procurement of equipment and ammunition. The future security and prosperity of Ukraine depend upon it.

The MCC initiative reinforces our collective long-term commitment to Ukraine and provides a permanent mechanism through which we can support the development of Ukraine's maritime capability, ensuring coherence, unity of effort, prioritisation of resource and synchronisation of activity.

The UK and our allies have been clear we will not stand by as the Kremlin persists in its disregard for the sovereignty of Ukraine and international law. This includes the recognition of Ukraine's sovereignty over its territorial waters which is established in accordance with international maritime law.

The MCC will be UK-led, alongside Norway, but will be international in nature with other nations contributing to the programme.

[HCWS112]

Response to the Independent Review of UK Government Welfare Services for Veterans

The Minister for Defence People and Families (Dr Andrew Murrison): I am making this joint statement my behalf and on behalf of the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer).

We are pleased to announce the completion and publication of the Government response to the independent review of UK Government welfare services for veterans.

We informed the House on 2 March that we had commissioned a review into the role, scope and breadth of UK Government welfare provision for veterans, including by the Ministry of Defence under the Veterans UK banner. This is the first time these have been considered in the round since the launch of the strategy

for our veterans and corresponding veterans strategy action plan, and the creation of the Office for Veterans' Affairs. On 17 July, we announced in a written statement to the House that this review had been published.

The review made 35 strategic and operational recommendations. The most significant of these include redefining the scope, time and eligibility limitations of Government services so that they are no longer available to all veterans in perpetuity; amending ministerial titles to better distinguish the roles of the MOD and OVA in veterans support; retiring the MOD's "Veterans UK" branding; exploring greater commissioning of services within and out of Government; and moving the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office into the OVA. These recommendations are supported by a series of proposals concerning improved and co-ordinated communications, and enhanced data collection and sharing.

There are several recommendations in the review that we can confirm we are actively taking forward, including the retirement of the "Veterans UK" branding name in 2024, and the transformation of how we deliver the welfare services that fall under that umbrella. This will enable a more consistent level of service to those accessing support. "Veterans" will be removed from the Minister for Defence People, Veterans and Service Families title, to avoid confusion as to who holds primacy for co-ordinating veterans' policy across Government. MOD will continue administering service pensions and compensation, transition support and welfare support for those with service-related issues.

OVA is working to consider the options for improving Veterans' Gateway content and the referral journey, exploring how a renewed Veterans' Gateway can direct users to the information and support they need. In addition, MOD and OVA will continue to work together to assess opportunities for data sharing more widely across Government and other organisations across the sector. Tied into this work, MOD will examine the proposal for a new welfare case management system with the aim to create a holistic view of a welfare case and be able to share this more easily, where appropriate, with other service providers so that a veteran could be referred more effectively to relevant support across the sector.

The Government recognise the views expressed in the review on the knowledge and trust held by the Northern Ireland Veterans' Support Office. OVA will fund the NIVSO for financial year 2024-25 from its budget, while evaluating its impact to determine future funding and governance arrangements.

We know that veterans and supporting organisations want to see real change taken to enhance and rationalise welfare services for our armed forces community, and that is what we intend to do in response to this review. The response sets out several of our commitments and high-level plans to take forward the intention of the recommendations, and further detail will be made available as we make progress in due course.

We are placing a copy of this review response in the Library of the House.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-12-11/HCWS108/>.

[HCWS108]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Anaesthesia Associates and Physician Associates: Regulation

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): Today I am pleased to announce that we published the response to the Government's consultation on the legislation that will empower the General Medical Council to regulate anaesthesia associate and physician associate roles.

This is an important step towards UK-wide statutory regulation of anaesthesia associates and physician associates under the GMC. The Government intend to lay the necessary legislation in both Houses. The legislation will also be laid before the Scottish Parliament.

Physician associates work under the supervision of doctors, taking medical histories, carrying out physical examinations, performing some medical procedures and analysing test results. Anaesthesia associates review patients before surgery, initiate and manage medications, administer fluids and blood therapy during surgery, and ensure that there is a plan for patients following their operation. Both roles can work autonomously, but always under the supervision of a fully trained and experienced doctor.

Earlier this year NHS England published its long-term workforce plan—the first of its kind in the history of the NHS—which included the ambition to grow medical associate roles as part of multidisciplinary teams. The plan commits to increasing the physician associate workforce to 10,000 by 2036-37 and the anaesthesia associate workforce to 2,000 over the same period.

Regulation will provide a standardised framework of governance and assurance for clinical practice and professional conduct in order to enable these roles to make a greater contribution to patient care. The GMC will have responsibility for and oversight of both doctors and these medical associate roles, allowing it to take a holistic approach to education, training and standards.

These two medical associate roles will be the first to be regulated under a reformed legislative framework. We will subsequently be using this framework to modernise all healthcare professional regulators' governing legislation, following the Law Commission's report, "Regulation of Health and Social Care Professionals".

Subject to parliamentary scrutiny, this legislation will instruct the GMC to commence regulation in 12 months, requiring it to consult on its own rules, policies and guidance needed to begin regulation of these associate roles.

The response to the consultation has been published on www.gov.uk and I have deposited a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS113]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Safe Access Zones: Commencement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Cleverly): People in this country have a wide range of views on abortion. All viewpoints are legal to hold, and it is important that, as a nation, we are tolerant and respectful of others' viewpoints. Indeed, it

is a cornerstone of our democracy that people are free to gather and express their views, however uncomfortable they may be to others.

The Government have always been clear that rights to protest do not extend to the intimidation or harassment of others. Where protests do amount to that, we expect the police and local authorities to use their powers to deal with such cases.

The debates during the passage of the Public Order Act 2023 showed that many people have firmly held—but opposing—views about the merits of limiting the right to protest in order to enable women to freely access abortion services. There were concerns that the right to protest, freedom of expression and religious belief were being unjustifiably constrained. Meanwhile, others argued with equal passion that women accessing abortion services deserved greater protection from harassing or intimidatory protest.

After considering the debates, the Houses of Parliament voted to introduce legislation to prohibit certain activities within 150 metres of an abortion clinic or a hospital that provides abortion services—“safe access zones”.

The Government respect the will of Parliament, and we anticipate commencing section 9 of the Public Order Act 2023 no later than spring 2024.^[1]

We have considered what needs to be done to ensure that safe access zones can be implemented as effectively as possible, with law enforcement agencies having a clear and consistent understanding around enforcement, and abortion service providers and protestors being clear as to what is expected under the new law.

We believe the best way to do this would be through publishing non-statutory guidance prior to the commencement of section 9.

I recognise that this is new legislation, on an emotive topic, with strong views on all sides of the debate and that determining the appropriate balance between competing interests will not always be straightforward. The Government have therefore decided to launch a public consultation on the non-statutory guidance for safe access zones and welcome responses from all interested parties. Running a public consultation will help ensure that we produce guidance that reflects the policy intention of Parliament and provides a workable enforcement policy.

The public consultation will run for six weeks until 22 January 2024. A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on www.gov.uk.

As Home Secretary, I am committed to ensuring that women in England and Wales feel safe and protected while exercising their legal right to access abortion services and I am optimistic that this Government will facilitate the effective introduction of safe access zones.

I thank Members across the House for their engagement on this issue.

^[1] “Abortion Clinics: Safe Access Zones”, *Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 November 2023, Vol. 834, c. 599-603: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2023-11-20/debates/60888608-B1EC-40F7-8CEC-3C77479493D7/AbortionClinicsSafeAccessZones>

SCOTLAND

Scottish Gender Recognition Legislation Section 35 Order: Judicial Review Outcome

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Alister Jack): I welcome the Court’s judgment, which upholds my decision to prevent the Scottish Government’s gender recognition legislation from becoming law. The Outer House of the Court of Session issued its judgment on the Scottish Government’s petition for judicial review on the section 35 Order made with respect to the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill on 8 December. The Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in December 2022, and in January 2023 I made an Order, under section 35 of the Scotland Act 1998, which prevented the Bill from proceeding to Royal Assent. In April 2023 the Scottish Ministers lodged a petition for judicial review challenging this Order.

The UK Government’s position in the judicial review was set out in our answers to the Scottish Government’s petition and in a note of argument, both of which have been published and I will place them in the Libraries of both Houses. The hearing took place on 19 and 20 September, in the Court of Session in Edinburgh.

I was clear that this legislation would have had adverse effects on the operation of the law as it applies to reserved matters, including on important Great Britain-wide equality protections. My decision was about the legislation’s consequences for the operation of GB-wide equalities protections and other reserved matters. As I set out when I made the section 35 Order, transgender people deserve our respect, support and understanding.

The section 35 power was included in the Scotland Act 1998, which established the Scottish Parliament. The power in section 35 of the Scotland Act is not new—it has existed as long as devolution itself. As Lady Haldane noted: “far from being an impermissible intrusion upon the constitutional settlement, section 35 is an intrinsic part of it.”

The section 35 power provides a sensible measure which can be used to ensure that devolved legislation does not have adverse impacts on reserved matters, including on equalities legislation such as the Equality Act 2010.

The power can only be exercised on specific grounds—and the fact that this is the first time it has been necessary to exercise the power in almost 25 years of devolution emphasises that it is not a power to be used lightly.

In the instance of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, I concluded that the Bill would have serious, adverse effects on the operation of the Equality Act 2010 and other reserved matters. It is for the Scottish Government to consider the next steps for the Bill with the Scottish Parliament.

I will place a copy of the judgment in the Libraries of both Houses, and the full text of the judgment can be found here: <https://www.scotcourts.gov.uk/search-judgments/court-of-session>.

Petition

Monday 11 December 2023

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NICE Enhertu cancer treatment

The petition of Elaine Lynch,

The petitioner declares that the National Institute for Health Care and Excellence (NICE), should take steps to approve the further use of Enhertu in NHS cancer treatments in patients that have the HER2 mutation; notes that NICE has currently only approved the use of Enhertu in the treatment of breast cancer; further notes that Enhertu has been approved in the United States for patients with the HER2 mutation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Saqib Bhatti, *Official Report*, 18 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 1202.]

[P002858]

Observations from the Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson):

The Government are committed to supporting timely access to clinically and cost-effective new drugs for cancer patients. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) is the independent body responsible

for developing authoritative, evidence-based guidance for the NHS on whether new medicines represent a clinically and cost-effective use of resources. NICE appraises all newly licensed medicines and is able to recommend the vast majority of new cancer medicines for use on the NHS, either for routine funding or for funding through the Government's £340 million Cancer Drugs Fund (CDF). The NHS is legally required to fund medicines recommended by NICE, usually within three months of final guidance.

NICE published guidance in 2021 and 2023 recommending Enhertu for the treatment of NHS patients with HER2-positive breast cancer and it is now available through the CDF to eligible NHS patients in line with NICE's recommendations. NICE is currently developing guidance on Enhertu for HER2-low metastatic or unresectable breast cancer after chemotherapy and has recently consulted on draft guidance that does not recommend it as a clinically and cost-effective use of NHS resources. NICE recognises that its decisions have real and important implications for NHS patients and only publishes final guidance on the use of a medicine after a careful consideration of the available evidence and engagement with interested parties. NICE will take the comments received fully into account in making its final recommendations and currently expects to publish final guidance in January 2024.

NICE is also due to appraise Enhertu for treating HER2-mutated unresectable or metastatic non-squamous non-small-cell lung cancer after one or more therapies. The company has requested a delay to the appraisal to ensure it can make a comprehensive evidence submission and this appraisal is anticipated to begin in mid-July 2024.

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 11 December 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Topical Questions

The following extract is from topical questions on 23 November 2023.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Ind): What steps are the Government taking to reduce the number of civil servants in order to achieve value for money for the taxpayer?

John Glen: I am looking carefully at where we are with the plans for this year—obviously, there is a half-way point in that cycle—and at what policies we can put in place. At the beginning of October, the Chancellor announced a freeze on recruitment.

[Official Report, 23 November 2023, Vol. 741, c. 450.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton).

The correct response should have been:

John Glen: I am looking carefully at where we are with the plans for this year—obviously, there is a half-way point in that cycle—and at what policies we can put in place. At the beginning of October, the Chancellor announced a **cap** on **headcount**.

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following is an extract from Prime Minister's questions on 22 November 2023.

Q4. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Scottish surcharge on energy means, according to Ofgem, that people in Scotland pay 50% more in standing charges than Londoners do, despite exporting 3.2 million hours of electricity to England in the past two months alone. Meanwhile, Scottish green energy producers pay higher charges than English power companies to connect to the grid. Does the Prime Minister think that that is fair to Scotland's consumers and businesses? [900234]

The Prime Minister: I refer to my previous answer about the considerable support we are providing to families across the United Kingdom with their energy bills. The hon. Lady mentions Scottish businesses, and it would be good if the Scottish National party realised that it should support the 200,000 people employed in Scotland's North sea oil and gas industry.

[Official Report, 22 November 2023, Vol. 741, c. 319.]

Letter of correction from the Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak):

An error has been identified in my answer to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) in Prime Minister's questions. The correct answer should have been:

The Prime Minister: I refer to my previous answer about the considerable support we are providing to families across the United Kingdom with their energy bills. The hon. Lady mentions Scottish businesses, and it would be good if the Scottish National party realised that it should support the 200,000 people employed in **the UK's** North sea oil and gas industry.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 11 December 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	593	EDUCATION—continued	
After-school Childcare:		Pupils with SEN and Disabilities	598
Long-term Educational Outcomes	597	Pupils with SEN and Disabilities	599
Childcare Support: Working Parents.....	595	School Funding: County Durham	594
Free School Meals: Impact on Children and		School Support Staff Vacancies: Trends.....	603
Parents	605	Special Needs Education: Access	600
Higher Education Institutions: International		Teacher Workload.....	603
Students	605	T-levels.....	596
Industrial Action: Impact on Children and		Topical Questions	607
Parents	593	Violence in Classrooms	606
Local Skills Needs: Education Providers and			
Businesses	601		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 11 December 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	31WS	HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	34WS
Trade Sanctions Implementation Update	31WS	Anaesthesia Associates and Physician Associates:	
		Regulation	34WS
DEFENCE	32WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	34WS
Maritime Capability Coalition Launch	32WS	Safe Access Zones: Commencement	34WS
Response to the Independent Review of UK		SCOTLAND	36WS
Government Welfare Services for Veterans.....	32WS	Scottish Gender Recognition Legislation Section	
		35 Order: Judicial Review Outcome	36WS

PETITION

Monday 11 December 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	5P	
NICE Enhertu cancer treatment	5P	

MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Monday 11 December 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	5MC	PRIME MINISTER	6MC
Topical Questions	5MC	Engagements.....	6MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Monday 18 December 2023**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 11 December 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 593] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Education

Israel-Hamas War: Diplomacy [Col. 613]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Mitchell)

Former Afghan Special Forces: Deportation [Col. 629]
Answer to urgent question—(James Heapey)

Presentation of Bills [Col. 638]
Bills presented, and read the First time

Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill [Col. 654]
Motion for Second Reading—(Michael Gove)—agreed to
Programme motion—(Scott Mann)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 715]

Housing Availability: Ilfracombe [Col. 716]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Israel and Palestine [Col. 185WH]
E-petition Debate

Written Statements [Col. 31WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]
Observations

Ministerial Corrections [Col. 5MC]
