

Tuesday
23 January 2024

Volume 744
No. 36



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 23 January 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Alcohol-dependent Parents: Support for Children

1. **Sara Britcliffe** (Hyndburn) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support the children of alcohol-dependent parents. [901098]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): May I start by wishing the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) a speedy recovery?

We are taking a wide-ranging approach to alcohol harms. Some £27 million has been invested in specialist alcohol care teams in a quarter of hospitals with the highest need, and we have published the first ever UK-wide clinical guidelines on harmful drinking and alcohol dependence, as well as providing around £300 million in funding to 75 local authorities through the family hubs and Start for Life programme. Family hubs funded through that programme are encouraged to provide full wrap-around support for families, which may include alcohol support services.

Sara Britcliffe: To the Government's credit, they are currently putting money into addiction services. However, at the same time, there is no national strategy for children of alcohol-dependent parents. That has not always been the case. Between 2017 and 2021, there were local and national helpline services funded through a national strategy. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss this matter, as the children in these awful situations are some of the most vulnerable in society?

Victoria Atkins: May I thank my hon. Friend for her care and also for sharing her experiences on this subject? Through the drugs strategy, we have committed an extra £532 million of funding over three years to improve alcohol and drug treatment services, with £15.7 million invested in Lancashire. Last year, we saw a further £2.8 million invested nationally in line with guidance for the extra drugs strategy funding, which allows local authorities to fund targeted services for parents in need of treatment and support for their children and families. I will, of course, be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Barry Sheerman, briefly—[*Laughter.*]

Mr Sheerman: I have turned over a new leaf, Mr Speaker.

May I urge the Secretary of State to take this issue very seriously, to direct much more social media at young people and to get into schools the message about the real damage that can be done to the entire life of a child if the mother is drinking alcohol during pregnancy?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing some insight into how we can best reach families. Of course, it is not just mums, but fathers or carers who can have a huge impact on our children. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom), is investing so much energy and commitment in our family hubs. We believe that they can be the centre for families to make the very best start to a child's life.

Hospital Discharge: Social Care

2. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What recent progress her Department has made on supporting the timely discharge of patients from hospital into social care. [901099]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): Discharging people on time is better for them and frees up hospital beds. We are changing how our health system works to do that: joining up health and social care and care transfer hubs; helping people to recover at home, with more than 10,000 new virtual ward beds; and investing in social care. And it is working. Last month, delayed discharges were down 9% compared with the end of December 2022 despite almost 1,000 extra urgent admissions to hospitals every day in December.

Sarah Green: Nearly one in six beds in my local healthcare trust in Buckinghamshire continues to be occupied by patients fit for discharge. A recent King's Fund report found that the Government's current practice of providing one-off funding to reduce delay, while welcome, comes with insufficient advance notice to allow for effective planning. What steps is the Minister's Department taking to ensure the best use of this funding?

Helen Whately: One reason we distributed discharge funding back in April last year was to give more advance notice to organisations, so that they could put in place what is needed to speed up discharges. I say to the hon. Lady that our plan is working. That is why, in her own trust, discharges at the end of December were down by a third compared with the previous year.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I note the progress that my hon. Friend referenced, but delayed discharges are still a major issue. Patient flow through a hospital is a critical factor, especially at the front door through emergency departments. We know the role that electronic bed management systems can play in helping that flow. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that more hospitals roll out that technology?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is right. I know how much work he did when he had oversight of urgent and emergency care services, which included his contribution to our urgent and emergency care recovery plan that was published almost a year ago. That plan included a host of steps to improve the flow through hospitals, including investment in bed management systems, as he described. The plan is working, which is why we are improving the flow through hospitals and seeing reductions in delayed discharges.

Nurses from Overseas

3. **Mr Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): What steps she is taking to increase the recruitment of qualified nurses from overseas. [901100]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): NHS data shows that we have delivered early on our manifesto commitment to have an extra 50,000 NHS nurses, with the number of nurses working in our NHS increasing from around 301,000 in 2019 to 357,000 today. That has been achieved through boosting training and education routes, ethically recruiting internationally and taking actions to improve retention. Measures such as the health and care visa introduced in 2020 support international recruitment.

Mr Roberts: I thank the Minister for his answer. As he knows, the national health service would completely collapse without the input and expertise of clinical staff from around the world. One barrier to those people coming to help us are the high fees for applying for permanent residency. Some nurses from countries such as India and the Philippines are having to take out expensive loans just to feel like they are welcome and able to stay in our country. I have presented a private Member's Bill to exempt NHS clinical staff from paying those high fees to become residents. Will the Minister support the Bill and work with his Home Office colleagues to find a way to make that a reality for those people who work so hard in our health service?

Andrew Stephenson: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the enormous contribution made by internationally recruited staff to our NHS. As he will know, immigration policy and fees are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. However, our long-term workforce plan supports international recruitment. In addition to the new visa route, we are exempting health and care staff from the immigration health surcharge.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that without our fantastic workforce, the NHS would not work. I pay tribute to all those hard-working nurses in all our hospitals and care centres, including at St Thomas' Hospital in my constituency. Does the Minister recognise that in addition to recruiting staff we have to look at retaining staff, who talk about the workload, their mental wellbeing and the fact that the cost of living is having a big impact on them? Does the Minister agree that the Government need to come forward with a wide-ranging plan on addressing workforce planning, pay, training, staff wellbeing and retention?

Andrew Stephenson: I completely agree with the hon. Lady, which is why this Government became the first Government ever to introduce a long-term workforce plan. Retention is one of the key pillars of the long-term workforce plan, and we are already seeing that deliver the result of keeping more staff in our NHS.

Accessibility to Dental Services

4. **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of the level of accessibility to dental appointments on urgent dental and oral surgery services. [901101]

7. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to increase capacity in NHS dental care. [901106]

18. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress she has made on introducing a dentistry recovery plan. [901117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): I am determined to ensure that everybody who needs NHS dental care can receive it. We have already implemented a package of reforms to improve access and provide fairer remuneration for dentists. That has had an effect, with 1.7 million more adults being seen, 800,000 more children being seen and a 23% increase in NHS activity in the past year. We know we need to do much more, and our dentistry recovery plan will be published shortly, setting out a big package of change.

Layla Moran: I listened carefully to what the Minister said. That change has not come to Oxfordshire, for sure—it is in a dire state. An Oxford resident wrote to me saying that when his NHS practice closed, he rang a dozen others across the county. Each one said they were offering NHS services but, in fact, they were not; they were only offering private care. In this cost of living crisis, people simply cannot afford that. As a result, they are waiting in A&E rather than getting treatment, and that ends up in their having oral surgery. What is the Minister doing now to improve the situation in Oxfordshire and across the country?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am incredibly sympathetic to what the hon. Lady says. In fact, in Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West integrated care board, the number of adults seen by an NHS dentist rose in the 24 months to June 2023 from 448,000 to 485,000, with a similar increase in the percentage of children seen. The situation is improving, but I completely agree with her that we need to do more, and we will be coming forward shortly with a big package of dental recovery plan reforms.

Giles Watling: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. Following my very productive meeting with her only a few days ago, will she confirm that NHS England locally has finally been unblocked and that my constituents in Clacton will soon benefit from more dentists practising on NHS patients?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend will know, this is a local matter, and it is for his ICB to determine whether it wishes to support the excellent pilot proposal

for overseas dental students in Clacton. At the same time, it needs to ensure that its actions are compliant with current legislation and within the delegation agreement with NHS England. I have just written to my hon. Friend about that, and my letter should address his concerns, but of course I would be happy to see him again if he has any further questions.

Rachael Maskell: We were promised “before the summer”, we were promised “after the summer”, we were promised “before Christmas”, we were promised “soon” and now we have been promised “shortly”. The reality is that Labour has a plan and the Government have not. In York, we cannot get an NHS dentist either. Blossom Family Dental Care is just handing back its contract. My constituents have nowhere to go. What is the Minister going to do to ensure that my constituents can access NHS dentistry?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: As I said to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), I absolutely understand the challenge for some people. The situation has improved over the last year. Since the covid pandemic, where almost every dentist had to stop working altogether, we have not seen the recovery we want. We are putting in plans—not a paper ambition like the one Labour has put forward, but significant reforms that will enable many more people to be seen by NHS dentists. I say gently to the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that a recent *Health Service Journal* article states that Humber and North Yorkshire ICB

“have indicated in board papers that dentistry funding will be squeezed to help them balance their books.”

I encourage her to talk to her ICB about that too.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): For new patients, accessing an NHS dentist in Peterborough is almost impossible. Should a new medical centre wish to establish a new NHS dental practice, doing so would require flexibility in units of dental activity rates and the ability to recruit dentists from overseas. Would the Minister give that effort her enthusiastic support and encourage NHS bosses to do the same?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is pushing against an open door. He may be aware that in 2023 we made some legislative changes to give the General Dental Council more flexibility to expand the registration options open to international dentists, tripling the capacity of three sittings of the overseas registration exam from August 2023 and increasing the number of sittings for the part 2 exam in 2024 from three to four.¹ That will create an additional 1,300 places overall for overseas dentists aiming to work in the UK. We will also be bringing forward measures to enable dental therapists to work at the top of their training, which will expand the capacity. He is right that reform of the UDA is also required and we will be bringing forward our plans shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I want to share with Ministers the experience of Emma from Grimsby, who said:

“NHS dentistry is a joke in the town at the moment. Thankfully I managed to get an emergency appointment in Scunthorpe (after being offered one in Doncaster originally) and I’ve now been

referred to hospital to have 3 wisdom teeth removed. My dentist closed at the onset of the pandemic and I’ve not been able to register with an NHS dentist since.”

What does the Minister have to say to Emma and the millions like her who cannot get an appointment when they need one?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to point that out. Emma has my absolute sympathy and apology for the fact that since the covid pandemic we have not seen the recovery of dentistry that we would have liked. I can tell her that in July 2022 we brought in significant reforms to encourage dentists to take on more NHS patients, but we recognise the need to do more. The long-term workforce plan will increase training places and the overseas registration will improve capacity, as will the changes to dental therapists’ programmes. All those things will improve the situation, but in the meantime we will be bringing forward our recovery plan very soon, which will immediately expand the incentives to NHS dentists.

NHS: Winter Pressures

5. **Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce pressure on NHS services in winter 2023-24. [901103]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): Our plan includes opening 5,000 more beds, increasing ambulance capacity, expanding innovative services such as virtual wards and bringing forward covid and flu vaccinations for the most vulnerable. Thanks to the hard work of staff, NHS performance this winter has improved on last year, despite the impact of industrial action.

Simon Lightwood: I am sure the caveat to that was the word “shortly”. I have had constituents contact me in desperation regarding delays at Pinderfields Hospital in my constituency. They tell me they have waited hours in emergency care this winter for routine blood tests—literally all day in some cases—even while in extremely poor health. The Tories’ patchwork reforms and sticking-plaster politics are not fooling anyone. Does the Secretary of State not think that those dangerously long waiting times are a damning indictment of 14 years of Conservative mismanagement? What does she say to my constituents who are suffering right now?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is a fair man, and that, being so, he will point out to his constituents, when they call him with their issues, that ambulance response times for category 2 emergency incidents in his local area have in fact been over 30 minutes faster than last year. However, we accept of course that this is a two-year plan and will take time to meet our full ambitions. Interestingly, the latest figures show that we have provided £6.9 million from the community diagnostic centres fund for the development of a community diagnostic centre at Wakefield. Presumably he welcomes that Conservative innovation.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

1. [Official Report, 23 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 14MC.] (Correction)

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The pressure on services is acute this winter, as it is every year. So far, we have heard very little mention in these 20 minutes of the biggest headache facing trusts, integrated care boards, patients and, of course, the Prime Minister's pledge to cut the waiting lists further. Given that the British Medical Association ballot on consultants' action closes today, and that the dispute among doctors in training continues, can the Secretary of State update the House on her message to those voting today, and on where we are in wider industrial disputes, which are a drag anchor on the NHS right now?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is right to point out that we are in the final few hours of the consultants' ballot on the pay reform programme that we have offered the British Medical Association. I very much hope that consultants will feel able to support that programme, because it is about bringing together the frankly quite bureaucratic system that they have to deal with at the moment, so that they are assessed in a shorter time with less bother and paperwork, while respecting their need to train and keep up their education and supporting professional activities commitments. I hope that they will agree with us on that. As I have said to the junior doctors committee from this Dispatch Box, should they return with reasonable expectations, we will, of course, reopen negotiations.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that preparation for winter started last January, but 54% of A&E departments were still rated inadequate or needing improvement in December, exacerbating the winter crisis. What will she do differently this year to ensure that we do not have another winter crisis in 2024-25?

Victoria Atkins: Again, the plan that we laid out last year is having a real impact at local level on the services being deployed through our accident and emergency services. We have seen discharge rates improving, for example. We appreciate that there can be local differences, but the importance that we put on maintaining that flow through hospitals is critical to ensuring that the waiting lists and waiting times that the hon. Lady describes are reduced. However, I gently remind the Labour party that it has been running the NHS in Wales for some time now, and it is a great shame that the good people of Wales—*[Interruption.]* The good people of Wales are waiting longer for their treatment—*[Interruption.]* They are almost twice as likely—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am a little bothered, because we have a long way to go on the Order Paper. I call the SNP spokesperson.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): We cannot discuss winter pressures in the NHS without acknowledging workforce shortages. The Secretary of State is having to contend with new immigration policies from her Cabinet colleagues that prevent dependants from coming to the UK, meaning that we are asking people to come and care for our loved ones while they leave behind theirs. I imagine that she is frustrated that

that is now another barrier to recruiting staff to our health and care sectors. Has she expressed those frustrations to her Cabinet colleagues?

Victoria Atkins: I genuinely want to work with the Scottish Government, because I am troubled, to put it bluntly, that Scotland has some of the worst health outcomes in western Europe. It has the worst level of drug death rates in Europe, the highest alcohol death rates in 14 years, and there was a fall in life expectancy for three years in a row. We offered to allow Scottish patients to receive lifesaving operations in England, but sadly, that offer has been declined. I remain genuinely willing to work with the Scottish Government to help them with their health service.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

6. **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase access to child and adolescent mental health services. [901104]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): We are investing an extra £2.3 billion a year to expand mental health services in England, with the aim of enabling 2 million more people to access mental health support, including 345,000 more children and young people.

Sarah Edwards: Many constituents in Tamworth are coming to me in desperate need of support for their children. Those constituents include Kate, whose daughter is at crisis point and has been without a psychiatrist since November; Roger, who has been waiting 18 months for an autism referral for his daughter; and Jess, who has been waiting for an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessment for her son. Will the Minister explain what action she is taking so that children, parents and families in my constituency can get the support they need?

Maria Caulfield: Through the investment we are putting in, particularly in the hon. Lady's local area, there are a number of initiatives to help support children and young people with their mental health. The Sandbox scheme, which is a funded NHS service, supports those in the south Staffordshire area; Malachi provides family support across Tamworth and east Staffordshire; and Combined Wellbeing, which is an online resource, covers north Staffordshire. There is also the Family Wellbeing Service, Action for Children for those aged five to 18 with mild to moderate mental health needs, and the Staffordshire Emotional Health and Wellbeing Service for those aged five to 18. I would recommend that the hon. Lady's constituents look up those services, because we are funding them to improve mental health care for children in her local area.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): The agony and damage of undiagnosed and untreated mental health conditions is nowhere more acute than in rural areas, where we see an epidemic of silent suffering. The Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust has long struggled with a series of management problems. I am sure the Minister has seen the recent report highlighting that between 2019 and 2022, we saw over 8,500 avoidable deaths—that is nearly 45 a week. Will she agree to meet

me, other Norfolk and Suffolk MPs, and those affected to look at what is really going on here and make sure that we turn that trust into a beacon of the best mental health services, rather than the worst?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. We were holding regular meetings with Norfolk and Suffolk MPs, the trust, the Care Quality Commission and NHS England, and with the new management team, that trust did appear to finally be turning things around. However, I am concerned to hear the points that my hon. Friend has raised. I am very happy to restart those meetings and will ask my office to arrange them as quickly as possible.

Adult Social Care

8. **Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase staff recruitment and retention in the adult social care sector. [901107]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): Care is a skilled profession, and I want care workers to get the support and recognition they deserve. This month, we took the next step in our ambitious care workforce reforms, publishing the first ever national career structure for the care workforce alongside our new nationally recognised care qualification.

Clive Efford: Ambitious care workforce reforms—it is all blah, isn't it? We have had 14 years of Conservative Government, and we have a crisis in every area of the NHS. Job insecurity, poor working conditions and low pay—one in five care workers is living in poverty—are all reasons why we have a recruitment and retention crisis in social care. Is not the truth that that is a damning indictment of 14 years of Conservative Government, and the only thing that is going to sort out social care and the crisis in recruitment and retention is a general election?

Helen Whately: I am actually really shocked by the way the hon. Member referred to the care workforce, with terms like “It is all blah”—very shocking. I am determined that care workers should get the recognition they deserve. We have a 10-year plan for social care, and it is working: the care workforce grew by over 20,000 last year, vacancies in social care are down, and retention is up. We are reforming social care so that it works as a career. That is why, as I said a moment ago—I wish the hon. Member had been listening—we have introduced the first ever career pathway for social care workers and a new national care qualification.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): But according to Care England and Hft, 54% of social care providers have increased their reliance on agency staff; 44% have turned down new admissions; and 18% have had to close services altogether. Labour's fair pay agreements will ensure that staff in the sector are treated with the dignity and respect that will make them want to stay, but after 14 years, why do Ministers not have a proper plan to address the workforce crisis facing adult social care? Is it because it is a crisis of their making?

Helen Whately: We have a plan for the social care workforce, and it is working. The social care workforce increased by over 20,000 last year, and it is still going up. But I will take no lectures from the hon. Member. In fact, his hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), early this morning on television, made it clear that Labour does not have a plan for social care—or if it does, it is clear that it will cost a lot of money and is yet another unfunded Labour plan.

Men's Health

9. **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): What steps she is taking to help improve men's health. [901108]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I assure my right hon. Friend that this Government are committed to improving men's health. That is why, in November, we announced a suite of measures, including a £16 million fund for a new prostate cancer screening trial, and the recruitment of a men's health ambassador. We have also launched our men's health taskforce to tackle the biggest health issues facing men.

Sir David Evennett: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I would urge her to continue to make men's health a top priority. In particular, can she look at how we can detect prostate cancer better and sooner? It is the most common cause of male cancer in the United Kingdom, and anything that can be done to reduce that number will be most welcome.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my right hon. Friend and male colleagues on the Government Benches, including my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher), who are fighting so hard to improve men's health. He is absolutely right: 12,000 men a year die from prostate cancer. That is why we are investing in the £16 million prostate cancer trial called Transform, using methods such as MRI to detect prostate cancer rather than PSA, which can be inaccurate. Thousands of men will be recruited. We are hoping that the trial will start in the spring, with recruitment in the autumn, including the recruitment of black men, who are disproportionately affected by prostate cancer.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does the Minister agree, however, that the information she has just given about why screening for prostate cancer does not happen for men is based on a study that is 20 years old? There are 12,000 deaths a year—it is the biggest killer among men, and the second biggest killer among all people—yet here is this evil cancer for which there is no screening programme whatsoever. Will she take steps to update current NHS guidance to ensure that all those at high risk of prostate cancer receive a targeted early detection service? I think she has hinted that she may be doing that, but will she finally introduce mass screening for prostate cancer? It is the only cancer without specifically commissioned early diagnosis work, and men are dying unnecessarily because of the failure to bring this in.

Maria Caulfield: We have more than hinted: we have just announced a £16 million pilot study of prostate cancer screening. We have a plan to tackle those 12,000 deaths a year, and it will work, because until now

we have not had a diagnostic test. PSA is not a sensitive test in all prostate cancers: there are many men with prostate cancer who do not express PSA. That is why the Transform study, using detection tools such as MRI, will be trialled, and if they are effective, such tools will be rolled out across the country.

Midwifery and Maternity Services

10. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the recruitment and retention of NHS midwifery and maternity staff. [901109]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): We are investing an additional £165 million a year to improve maternity and neonatal care, rising to £186 million a year from April. This will increase the number of midwifery posts and improve the quality of care that mothers and babies receive. As of October last year, there were 23,100 full-time equivalent midwives working in NHS trusts and other core organisations in England, which is more than 1,000 more than a year ago and 3,500 more than in 2010.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Secretary of State for that response. The Royal College of Midwives estimates that there is a shortage of around 2,500 full-time midwives working in the NHS. I know that at first hand from Cossham Hospital in my constituency, which has a wonderful birth centre, but it has been closed for most of the last few years, because it simply cannot get the midwives to staff it—they have to go elsewhere where more serious cases need to be dealt with. What is she doing specifically about the retention of midwives? I know that student numbers are, thankfully, coming up, but a lot of midwives are choosing to leave the profession because there is not enough flexibility in their work.

Victoria Atkins: I think we all agree that a career as a midwife is just one of the most rewarding and fulfilling careers that one can hope for. That is why we have placed such priority on retention in the long-term workforce plan that we launched last year. The national retention programme for midwifery and nursing has prioritised five actions to support staff retention, including menopause guidance, because we know that that can be an issue for midwives, and valuing them and their contribution is also a key objective of NHS England's three-year plan for maternity services.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): As well as recruitment and retention, training matters. Anglia Ruskin University has a campus in Chelmsford and is the provider of the largest number of health and social care degrees in the country, training midwives, nurses and, since the medical school opened, doctors. Will the Secretary of State back the campaign to expand the medical school in Chelmsford so that we can train even more local people to work in our local NHS?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising her local college, which does amazing work for the whole of the NHS as well as in her local area. I may have to retain a discreet silence over that particular

application but I know that if any Member is sure to advocate effectively for their local area, it is my right hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): Recruiting and retraining more NHS staff is crucial if women are to get gynaecology, obstetric and maternity care. I would like to share the story of Sandy Simmons. She was told 11 months ago that she needed surgery for a uterine prolapse; today, after nearly a year of pain, she is still waiting. Labour candidates such as Keir Cozens in Great Yarmouth are speaking up for women like Sandy and the 905 women waiting more than a year for treatment in Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital. Will the Secretary of State apologise to these women—or, like the Prime Minister, will she just walk away?

Victoria Atkins: I was genuinely delighted to welcome the hon. Lady to the Government's women's health summit last week to announce the consolidation, and indeed the improvement, of the women's health strategy that this Government have launched. We saw significant success last year with hormone replacement therapy improvements and she knows, because she attended the summit, that I have just announced a £50 million research fund looking at maternity disparities and also research into female-specific conditions. Any concern she has about operation times she should take up with the local trust and it will perhaps tell her what impact industrial action has had, sadly, on elective surgery.

Cancer: Early Diagnosis

11. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to support the early diagnosis of cancer. [901110]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): I know this is an issue close to my right hon. Friend's heart and pay tribute to her for her work as vice-chairman of the all-party group on radiotherapy. The pandemic has of course presented a real challenge to delivering the Government target to diagnose 75% of stageable cancers at stage 1 or stage 2 by 2028, but I am pleased to be able to tell the House that we are coming through that and last year diagnosed more cancers at stage 1 and stage 2 than ever before.

Theresa Villiers: Cancer Research UK has published an ambitious plan, "Longer, better lives", which reminds us that for some cancer patients just a few weeks of delay can make the difference between whether they can be offered curative treatment or just palliative care. Will the new diagnostic centres being opened by the Government, including at Finchley Memorial Hospital, bring waiting times down and secure that early diagnosis that is so important to surviving cancer?

Andrew Stephenson: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. Diagnostic checks are a key part of the cancer pathway and the 150 community diagnostic centres opened by this Government, including the one at the Finchley Memorial Hospital, will provide earlier diagnostic tests, support earlier diagnosis and bring down waiting times, benefiting millions of patients.

These centres have delivered more than 6 million additional tests for all elective activity since July 2021 and we expect the Finchley Memorial Hospital CDC to provide over 126,000 tests for elective care in the next financial year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that response. Research and development is very important; it means we can find more cures for cancer. My father, who is dead and gone, survived cancer on three occasions; that happened because of advances in finding cures. What is being done to work alongside those in research and development to ensure that even more cancers can be cured and we can go from a 50% rate to perhaps a 60% or even 70% rate for those who live longer?

Andrew Stephenson: I was delighted that one of my first visits in the new year was to Northern Ireland to see some of the life sciences companies, particularly those based around Queen's University Belfast. That sector in Northern Ireland is flourishing. We are keen to support companies working in research and bring together world-leading universities such as Queen's with the private sector and the NHS to deliver improved outcomes for all patients across every part of the United Kingdom.

Sickle Cell Disease

12. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve healthcare outcomes for patients with sickle cell disease. [901111]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): I know this is an important issue for the hon. Lady in her role as chair of the sickle cell and thalassaemia all-party parliamentary group. We are working hard to provide the best possible care to those living with sickle cell disease. That includes boosting Ro subtype blood donation numbers, identifying improvements in clinical pathways and delivering world-leading treatments, such as the new blood-matching genetic test announced by NHS England yesterday, which will reduce the risk of side effects and offer more personalised care.

Janet Daby: I congratulate NHS England on the launch of the new blood-matching genetic test for sickle cell patients, but it has been more than two years since the "No One's Listening" report, which made the key recommendation that sickle cell patients receive pain relief within 30 minutes of attending accident and emergency. Why is that still not happening for sickle cell patients, and would the Minister like to meet me and the Sickle Cell Society to discuss how to achieve that?

Andrew Stephenson: I of course would be happy to meet the hon. Lady and the Sickle Cell Society to look at how we can improve patient experiences and ensure that all patients benefit from timely access to the medications they need. I am delighted that she welcomes yesterday's announcement. It is an example of how the NHS can bring forward world-firsts and is leading the way to transform patient care and improve patient outcomes.

Urgent and Emergency Care

13. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase access to urgent and emergency care. [901112]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): Almost a year ago, we published our urgent and emergency care recovery plan. The NHS has already halved the waiting times for category 2 ambulances and brought down waits in A&E. We are determined to cut NHS waits, and our plan is working.

Mark Pawsey: Rugby is one of the fastest growing places in the UK. While we have had additional services introduced at our local Hospital of St Cross, my constituents have insufficient accident and emergency provision. Thousands of local residents have signed my petition for doctor-led accident and emergency care at the Hospital of St Cross. I know it is a matter for the integrated care board, but will the Minister give her support? As a previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) and the previous Secretary of State have visited in the past few months, and I invite this Minister to do likewise.

Helen Whately: I thank my hon. Friend for his invitation. He has been a tireless campaigner on this issue on behalf of his constituents. The future of healthcare is about getting people the care that they need, where they need it and when they need it, and Rugby is no different. New local NHS services are bringing care closer to home in his area, such as the new imaging unit at the Hospital of St Cross that opened in September.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Access to urgent and emergency care can be greater facilitated when greater protection is offered to staff, particularly the many who suffer attacks in emergency departments at hospitals across the United Kingdom—often by people who are intoxicated.

Helen Whately: The hon. Member makes an important point. The safety of our staff in the national health service is important, including those in urgent and emergency care departments, as well as the ambulance services. He is absolutely right to point that out, and it is never acceptable for anyone, including patients, to be violent towards staff.

Mental Health Services

14. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase access to mental health services. [901113]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): We are investing a record amount in NHS mental health services, committing £2.3 billion extra a year for the expansion and transformation of services in England, which will enable 2 million more people to access mental health support.

Jeff Smith: If only the reality was that rosy. The entire sector is calling out for reform of the Mental Health Act 1983. With our mental health services in crisis, why did the Government scrap the long-awaited

and overdue mental health Bill, which could have started to alleviate pressures on trusts by reducing the numbers of people detained inappropriately and making services more fit for purpose? Is it not true that we need a Labour Government to take action on this issue?

Mr Speaker: It is going to be a long year.

Maria Caulfield: I have news for the hon. Gentleman, because we have a plan and it is working. Our investment of £143 million into crisis support is showing early evidence of reducing admissions—admissions are 8% lower. With the crisis telephone services, which are available 24/7, we have admissions down 12%. More importantly, detentions under the Mental Health Act are 15% lower. We have a plan, and it is working.

In-patient Units: People with Learning Disabilities

15. **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): What recent progress her Department has made on reducing the number of people with a learning disability in in-patient units. [901114]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): We have made progress against our target to reduce learning disability and autism in-patient numbers in England by 50% since 2015. For people with a learning disability without an autism diagnosis, there has been a 58% net reduction; for people with a learning disability who are autistic, the net reduction is 35%.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Secretary of State for that comprehensive answer. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, I have been hearing from organisations such as Mencap that remain concerned that people with learning difficulties are disproportionately detained for five to 10 years and for over 10 years. Will she reassure those organisations that the “Building the right support” action plan will continue to progress the great work that is being done?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for her interest and, of course, her many years working as a clinical psychologist. She brings that experience to the Chamber. National commissioning guidance to integrated care boards was published in November. It sets out that a mental health in-patient stay for a person with a learning disability

“should be for the minimum time possible, for assessment and/or treatment which can only be provided in hospital”.

In overseeing implementation of the action plan going forwards, the “Building the right support” delivery board will maintain focus on quality of care and on reducing long stays.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is vital for the Government to do more to move autistic people and people with learning disabilities out of in-patient units and back to their communities. Recently, in the trial of staff at Whorlton Hall, we saw staff who were cruel and uncaring. Delivering sentences, the judge said that Whorlton Hall was an

“unpredictable and...frightening place to live”.

Is it not time for the Government to close down those units and move the majority of people into the community?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point. We were all dismayed and upset to see the experiences of residents in those units, and we saw the correct criminal outcomes—if I am allowed to say that—for those involved in those assaults. A review is going on as to how those issues are affecting the estate as a whole, but we are clear that in-patient stays should happen only when they are strictly necessary. We must be mindful that clinicians will be taking many situations into account, including not just the safety of the patient but the safety of the wider community.

Topical Questions

T1. [901123] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Victoria Atkins): Women’s health needs are often overlooked and under-researched. Through our women’s health strategy, the Government are changing that. Last year, we made menopause a priority, helping almost half a million women get hormone replacement therapy for less than £20 a year. This year, we are building on that work and will have a women’s health hub in every integrated care board area in England. We will promote research into conditions that only affect women, such as endometriosis and lobular breast cancer, and those that affect women differently from men, such as heart attack symptoms.

We have also launched the first research challenge—worth £50 million—to tackle maternity disparities that have no place in modern Britain. Following the brave campaigns of my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) and for Stafford (Theo Clarke), by March we will make dedicated maternal mental and physical healthcare available to every woman in England.

Ruth Cadbury: I recently met two constituents with experience of invasive lobular breast cancer. Invasive lobular carcinoma is the second most common form of breast cancer, but it is not generally picked up by mammograms, and it behaves differently from other breast cancers. However, lobular breast cancer has been understudied and underfunded, and it urgently needs research funding. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what specific actions her Government are taking to address those gaps? Will she also reply to the Lobular Moon Shot Project, to which she—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topical questions.

Victoria Atkins: I gently remind the hon. Lady about the statement that I just gave. Last week we held the women’s health summit, at which I announced that we are encouraging research into conditions such as lobular breast cancer. I made that announcement because of two amazing women I met recently who were living with the condition. They were introduced to me by my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Sir Jeremy Quin) and my right hon. Friend—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ruth Cadbury: I am waiting for the reply.

Mr Speaker: Order. Please can I just say that these are topicals? I have got to get through a big list, and lots of Members are standing. We need short, punchy questions, and the same with answers.

T6. [901128] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I have been carrying out a health survey of thousands of residents in Harrogate and Knaresborough, to ask them for their experiences and views of the NHS. I will share the results with local healthcare professionals, to support them and their work. When the results are in, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how they will help inform and shape our local healthcare planning?

Victoria Atkins: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that. As always, he is an excellent advocate for his constituency, and I will enjoy listening to the results of his survey.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Mike Reader, Labour's candidate for Northampton South, shared with me the horrific experience of Stanley, who had severe abdominal pain and called an ambulance, only to be told it would take hours and to go to A&E. There, he was told to wait for assessment on a patio chair outside. It was 3°. Who is to blame?

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I am very sorry to hear of the experience of that specific constituent. Because of challenges that the NHS faces, particularly our urgent and emergency care services, almost a year ago we set out our urgent and emergency care recovery plan, to speed up care for people in A&E and reduce waits. That plan is working. We are seeing ambulances get to people quicker, and people treated quicker in A&E.

Andrew Gwynne: That is not a one-off. Why will the Minister not take a shred of responsibility for the chaos that her party has caused our NHS? The last Labour Government achieved the shortest waits and the highest patient satisfaction in NHS history. The Conservatives have delivered the longest waits and the lowest patient satisfaction in history. Let us have that general election, so that she can defend her abysmal record to the public.

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman obviously was not listening to my answer; in fact, he was reading aloud. Our urgent and emergency care plan is working. It is reducing rates in A&E, and ambulances are getting to people faster. Meanwhile, I am sorry to say that in the Labour-run NHS in Wales, more than half of patients are waiting more than four hours in A&E.

T7. [901129] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to ascertain the cause of ongoing problems affecting access to riluzole, the only licensed drug for the treatment of motor neurone disease in the UK, to provide clarity to the MND community and ensure that normal supply is restored as soon as possible?

Victoria Atkins: We understand how worrying the possibility of medication shortages can be. There is a supply issue with riluzole 50 mg tablets, caused by a supplier experiencing manufacturing issues. We have a

well-established procedure in place to deal with such issues, and are working with the industry, the NHS and others to resolve it as quickly as possible. We have contacted alternative suppliers and have secured sufficient volumes of stock.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Cancer Research UK has found that too much UV radiation is the third biggest cause of cancer across these isles. Does the Secretary of State recognise that cost is a barrier for people wishing to protect their skin from the sun, and will she commit to having conversations with Cabinet colleagues to remove VAT on sun protection products, which will help protect NHS budgets and ultimately save lives?

Victoria Atkins: We see that as part of a much wider campaign to ensure that we treat the sun safely, by reducing the amount of time we spend in the sun, particularly during peak hours of the day in summertime. I keep all these discussions in play with my Treasury colleagues.

T10. [901132] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Rural constituencies such as mine are seeing a growing number of dentists withdraw from NHS provision. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that vital dental care is provided for everyone, particularly in rural communities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dame Andrea Leadsom): My hon. Friend is a great advocate for her community, and I pay tribute to her for working with determination to see more access to dentistry in Cornwall. She is right to do so. We have a plan, which is almost ready. I urge her to wait just a little longer. She, like all colleagues across the House, will see significant and real measures to improve access to dentistry.

T2. [901124] **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): NHS staff have expressed concerns about the Anaesthesia Associates and Physician Associates Order 2024. Can the Minister tell me if resource will be needed for AAs and PAs to be properly supervised by doctors on a one to one ratio? Will he meet trade unions and professional bodies as a matter of urgency to clarify the Government's position on this hugely important public health issue?

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Andrew Stephenson): PAs and AAs are an essential part of the reform piece to the long-term workforce plan. I note that the order was passed by the House last night without a Division, so I am grateful for that cross-party support. We are working with the General Medical Council, the British Medical Association and others to ensure that the regulations are fit for the purpose. We look forward to the GMC launching its consultation on the fine print of the regulations very soon.

Mrs Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): As my constituents have to travel to Tamworth, Burton or Derby for diagnostic tests, can I encourage the Secretary of State to look favourably on a bid for a new much-needed community diagnostic centre in South Derbyshire?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend sincerely for her question. The good news is that community diagnostic centres have now delivered over 6 million additional tests and scans since July 2021 thanks to the hard work of NHS staff, but I will of course be delighted to meet her to discuss her plans for her local constituency.

T3. [901125] **Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): New British Heart Foundation analysis shows that the number of people dying before the age of 75 in England from heart and circulatory diseases has risen to its highest level in over a decade. The rate of premature deaths from cardiovascular disease has now increased in England for three years back to back. Why are the Government taking such a long time to get to grips with this crisis?

Andrew Stephenson: The NHS long-term plan commits to a number of key ambitions to improve care and outcomes for individuals suffering from cardiovascular disease, including enhanced diagnostic support in the community, better personalised planning, and increasing access to cardiac rehabilitation. Those ambitions will support the delivery of the aim to prevent 150,000 heart attacks, strokes and dementia cases by 2029.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The single biggest concern my constituents raise about healthcare is access to GPs, especially in Blackrod and Westhoughton. What more can my right hon. Friend do to ensure we have better GP access?

Dame Andrea Leadsom: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that our NHS long-term plan sets out a real-terms increase of at least £4.5 billion a year for primary and community care by 2023-24. We now have over 2,000 more full-time equivalent GPs working in our NHS, and we have had the amazing achievement of more than 50 million more appointments per year, beating our target several months early. Things are improving significantly, and there are many more measures I would be delighted to talk to him privately about.

T4. [901126] **Samantha Dixon** (City of Chester) (Lab): In the NHS in Cheshire and Merseyside between April and June last year, the 62-day cancer waiting time target was not met. If the target had been achieved, around 150 extra patients would have been treated on time. What would the Secretary of State like to say to those 150 patients?

Andrew Stephenson: The 62-day backlog has fallen by 27% since its peak in May 2020. We know there is more to be done, and that is why we are bringing forward more measures as early as possible. In April 2023, more than nine in 10 patients—90%—started their first cancer treatment within one month of a decision to treat.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Many of my constituents who use Regis Medical Centre have been left angry and frustrated by the botched implementation of an Anima booking system, leading to them being unable to get an appointment or the treatment they need. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can learn the lessons from that botched implementation and make sure trust in that GP surgery is restored?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, happy to.

T5. [901127] **Sarah Dyke** (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I recently met the staff of a pharmacy in Bruton in my constituency to hear about some of the challenges it is facing. Community pharmacists are dispensing some of the country's most widely prescribed drugs at a loss, therefore subsidising the NHS. What steps is the Secretary of State's Department taking to prevent the closure of community pharmacists?

Victoria Atkins: We are ensuring that community pharmacists have an even greater role in primary care than they have already. For example, we saw the first stage of the roll-out of Pharmacy First in December, with blood pressure checks and contraceptive care being rolled out. I am very pleased that we are on track to deliver the full roll-out of Pharmacy First by the end of the month.

Sir Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): The colour of someone's skin should not have an impact on the reliability of medical devices, but we know that that is what happened during the pandemic for many black and Asian patients. When I was the Health Secretary, I commissioned an independent review of the equity of medical devices from Professor Dame Margaret Whitehead. Her report was handed to the Department in June last year, but the Department has not yet published it or responded to it. I know that my right hon. Friend cares about health inequalities as much as I do, so may I ask her to publish the report, along with a full Government response, as a matter of urgency?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for commissioning that vital piece of work. I am giving the matter my closest attention, and I hope very much to be in a position to respond to his points in due course.

T8. [901130] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): This week the Riverside unit in my constituency, which treats young people with severe eating disorders, had to close temporarily because of concerns about its ability to provide safe care. What are the Government doing to ensure that young people who, in many cases, go through mental health crises as a result of their eating disorders receive the care that they need as close to home as possible?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): As the hon. Lady will know, we are investing more in mental health services for young people in particular and, indeed, for those with eating disorders. We are seeing more young people more quickly than ever before, but if the hon. Lady wishes to raise a local issue with me, I shall be happy to meet her and discuss it.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The opening of a new block of operating theatres next month marks the latest investment in Torbay Hospital, but it is, of course, a prelude to the major rebuilding work. When does the Secretary of State plan to deliver the next update on the progress of that project?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Victoria Atkins: I am delighted that the House is as happy about that expansion as the hon. Gentleman and I are. I will meet him to go through his plans, because I know how carefully he has campaigned for this important asset in his constituency.

T9. [901131] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): In the early hours of Friday morning, I arrived at the Royal Lancaster Infirmary with my sick son in an ambulance. As we walked past trolleys in the corridor, the nurse who was treating him said, “Our A&E unit is too small. We were promised a new hospital four years ago, but I think they have forgotten about us.” Can the Secretary of State tell that nurse, my constituent, whether we have indeed forgotten about that new hospital?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady is aware of my knowledge not only of that hospital, but of her local area. I will look into this matter for her, because I want to ensure that the good people of Lancashire, Mr Speaker, are looked after as we would all hope and expect.

Mr Speaker: I look forward to seeing that in Chorley.

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I warmly welcome what my right hon. Friend said last week about encouraging research on lobular breast cancer, and I look forward to meeting the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), shortly to work out how we can operationalise what is her clear ambition.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) for bringing two amazing women to talk to me about the impact of lobular cancer. For the benefit of Members on both sides of the House, last week we sent out a “Dear colleague” letter and graphics about the women’s health strategy so that we can all help our constituents to understand what this Conservative Government are doing to ensure that the healthcare of women is faster, simpler and fairer.

Action Against Houthi Maritime Attacks

12.33 pm

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Overnight, at my order, the Royal Air Force engaged in a second wave of strikes against Houthi military targets in Yemen. We did so because we continue to see, for instance in intelligence, an ongoing and imminent threat from the Houthis to UK commercial and military vessels and to those of our partners in the Red sea and the wider region.

I told the House last week that we would not hesitate to respond if the acts continued, in order to protect innocent lives and preserve the freedom of navigation, and that is what we have done. We acted alongside the United States, with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada and the Netherlands. We acted on the same basis as on 11 January—fully in line with international law, in self-defence and in response to a persistent threat—and, and as with the first wave, the strikes were limited to carefully selected targets, with maximum care taken to protect civilian lives.

Attempting to counter every Houthi attack after it has been launched is simply not sustainable. We have already shot down dozens of missiles and drones targeted at civilian vessels and at the Royal Navy, and the Houthis have conducted at least 12 further attacks on shipping since 11 January, including just last night, shortly before our strikes were conducted. So we acted to further degrade their ability to mount such attacks.

Last week I gave the House our initial assessment of the first wave of strikes. Since then, we have seen further evidence that they were successful in degrading the Houthis' military capability. Last night we hit two military sites just north of Sana'a, each containing multiple specific targets which the Houthis used to support their attacks on shipping.

I want to be very clear: we are not seeking a confrontation. We urge the Houthis, and those who enable them, to stop these illegal and unacceptable attacks. But if necessary, the United Kingdom will not hesitate to respond again in self-defence. We cannot stand by and allow these attacks to go unchallenged. Inaction is also a choice. With that in mind, and given the persistent nature of the threat, it was important to update the House again today. I listened carefully to right hon. and hon. Members last week, and we will give the House a chance for a full debate on our broader approach in the Red sea tomorrow.

We took extensive steps to address this threat to international security before taking military action. We launched Operation Prosperity Guardian in December with over 20 other countries. The international community issued repeated statements on 1 December, 19 December, 3 January and 12 January condemning the attacks and urging the Houthis to desist. On 10 January, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution demanding that they stop the attacks. I think it is important to note that the internationally recognised Government of Yemen have also condemned the Houthis for their actions, accusing them of

“creating a conflict for propaganda”

serving only their own selfish ends.

As we saw in the House last week, Members are rightly keen to hear how this situation can be brought to an end. The answer must include the vital right to self-defence when we are attacked, but that is only one part of our wider response, which I want to say more about today. First, we are increasing our diplomatic engagement, because we recognise the deep concerns about, and the complexities of, the current situation. I spoke to President Biden about these issues last night. The Foreign Secretary will be in the region in the coming days, and he met his Iranian counterpart last week. He made it clear that they must cease supplying the Houthis with weapons and intelligence and use their influence to stop Houthi attacks.

Secondly, we must end the illegal flow of arms to the Houthi militia. We have intercepted weapons shipments in the region before, including components of the very missiles used by the Houthis today. This brings home the importance of maritime security in the region, and it includes working closely with our allies and partners to disrupt and deter the supply of weapons and components.

Thirdly, we will use the most effective means at our disposal to cut off the Houthis' financial resources, where they are used to fund these attacks. We are working closely with the US on this and plan to announce new sanctions measures in the coming days.

Fourthly, we need to keep helping the people of Yemen, who have suffered so terribly as a result of the country's civil war. We will continue to deliver humanitarian aid and to support a negotiated peace in that conflict, not just because it is the right thing to do but because we need to show the people of Yemen that we have no quarrel with them—as the Yemeni Government understand. This is our strategy and we will keep all other tools under close review as well.

I repeat that there is no link between our actions of self-defence in the Red sea and the situation in Israel and Gaza. Those who make that link do the Houthis' work for them, and I want to be clear that those here at home who glorify the Houthis' attacks are glorifying terrorism, plain and simple. They will be met with a zero-tolerance approach. All of that said, I would like to address the situation in Israel and Gaza directly because it remains at the forefront of Members' minds. President Biden and I discussed this again yesterday and he shares my deep concerns about the situation and the terrible suffering and loss of civilian lives, so together we are working to establish a new aid route through the port of Ashdod.

The UK wants to see an end to the fighting in Gaza as soon as possible. We are calling for an immediate humanitarian pause to get aid in and hostages out, as a vital step towards building a sustainable, permanent ceasefire without a return to destruction, fighting and loss of life. To achieve that, Hamas must agree to the release of all hostages. They can no longer be in charge of Gaza. The threat from Hamas terror and rocket attacks must end, and an agreement must be in place for the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza to provide governance, services and security. That pathway to peace should unite the whole House. I believe we are also united in support of a two-state solution.

Through all the complexity of the current situation, our principles hold firm: resolute in the face of threats, compassionate in support of those in need, and determined in maintaining stability, security and the rule of law.

That is what our allies and partners have come to expect from the United Kingdom, and that is what we stand for.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

12.40 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of his statement.

Labour said that we will judge further action against the Houthis on a case-by-case basis, so let me be clear that we back this targeted action to reinforce maritime security in the Red sea. The Houthi attacks must stop. They are designed to destabilise us, so we must stand united and strong. They bring danger to ordinary civilians working hard at sea, so we must protect those civilians. And they aim to disrupt the flow of goods, food and medicines, so we must not let them go unaddressed.

The professionalism and bravery of those serving on HMS Diamond and flying RAF Typhoons are both totally accepted and completely remarkable. Without them, Britain cannot be a force for good in the world.

This is, of course, the second set of strikes in which the UK has participated. The stated aim of the first set was to deter and degrade Houthi capability, but we now know that their attacks have continued. While we do not question the justification for action, it is right that the House hears more about its effectiveness. Labour, of course, recognises that strikes can reduce threat without eliminating it, and we recognise that military action is just one component of a wider diplomatic strategy. None the less, I ask the Prime Minister to set out his confidence that these strikes will be effective in reducing Houthi capabilities. As the situation has evolved, although we of course understand the clear legal basis for these actions, will the Prime Minister commit to restating and republishing the Government's legal position?

Alongside the UK and the US, other countries have provided non-operational support for these strikes and maritime protection in the Red sea. Many more support the United Nations Security Council resolution that utterly condemns the Houthi attacks. What work is being done to hold together that coalition and, if possible, to enlarge it? The action that the UK takes must draw on the support of all those who care about international law. Given the special role that the UK plays in Yemen, will the Prime Minister set out the concrete steps, in addition to those in his statement, that we are taking to help the people of Yemen who have suffered terribly as a result of that country's civil war?

The international community cannot allow itself to be divided, which is exactly what the Houthi backers in Tehran would love to see. On that note, can the Prime Minister update the House on whether his Government have given further consideration to the proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps? We need every tool at our disposal to disrupt IRGC activities, and we must show Iran that it cannot pursue its ends by destabilising the entire region.

Like the Prime Minister, I totally reject the Houthi claims that attacking ships from around the world is somehow linked to the conflict in Gaza. These attacks do absolutely nothing for the Palestinian people. What is needed in Gaza is a humanitarian truce now, a

sustainable ceasefire to stop the killing of innocent civilians, space for the return of all hostages, urgent humanitarian relief and a decisive step towards a two-state solution. Palestinian statehood is the inalienable right of the Palestinian people; it is not in the gift of a neighbour. Does the Prime Minister agree that a secure Israel alongside a viable Palestinian state is the only path to a just and lasting peace? We must stop those who sow division; we must do what we can to disrupt and deter the Houthis; and we must stay united and steadfast in defence of our values, our security and our right to self-defence. Labour will always act in the national interest, and we provide our full support for these necessary and proportionate strikes.

The Prime Minister: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for his statement and his support—I am grateful to him for that. He raises all the right questions about the action today, which I am happy to answer.

First, the right hon. and learned Gentleman asked about the effectiveness of strikes in deterring and precisely degrading capability. I am pleased to tell him that further evidence, after the initial statement I made last week, has demonstrated to us that the strikes last week were effective in degrading capability and all the intended targets were destroyed. I am also pleased to say that our initial evidence from last night's strikes is also that all intended targets were destroyed, which demonstrates to us that, working with our allies, who have the same view, the strikes are working to degrade capability, even though, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman said, there may be a difference between reducing and eliminating. We are confident that what we are doing is working to degrade capability. The targets are specifically selected on the basis of intelligence; they are military sites that impact the security and safety of seafarers and shipping. To that end, I am confident that, as I said, the strikes are being carried out in a way that is effective in achieving their aim.

I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for acknowledging that the strikes sit within a wider strategy in the region to bring about an end to what we are seeing. The Foreign Secretary will be in the region this week, engaging extensively with our partners and allies on all the topics that the right hon. and learned Gentleman raised, and particularly ensuring that we can continue to make progress on a sustainable peace in Yemen. No doubt the Foreign Secretary will talk to our Saudi partners about that and, crucially, broaden the coalition of support for the action we have taken.

As I pointed to in my statement, multiple statements have been made by a wide coalition of countries from around the world in support of action. The right hon. and learned Gentleman can rest assured that we are continuing to expand that coalition of support, because the security of navigation and shipping impacts all countries, wherever they might be, not just in the Red sea. All of us have seen the consequences of the war in Ukraine on energy bills across the European continent and beyond, so I think people are very alive to the interconnectedness of the global economy and the importance of protecting freedom of navigation everywhere.

On the legal advice, my understanding was that we had published or were imminently about to publish a summary of the legal advice—I can happily give the right hon. and learned Gentleman that confirmation.

[The Prime Minister]

I can also confirm to him that the basis for action remains the same as it was last time, but an update to that effect has been published or will shortly be published by the Attorney General.

Lastly, I will touch on the right hon. and learned Gentleman's broader point. He is right to highlight the malign influence of Iran in the region. Obviously, we do not comment on ongoing decisions or processes relating to the proscription of organisations, but he can rest assured that we are alive to the risk and working closely with our allies, particularly the United States and our European allies, to jointly work out the most effective way of countering that influence. As I have said, the Foreign Secretary spoke to his counterpart last week, and we will continue to use all measures at our disposal to protect ourselves. We passed the National Security Act 2023 here in the UK and have already sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety.

More generally, on the specific action we have taken, I again thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his support. We have taken limited, proportionate and, I believe, necessary action in self-defence. We will always reserve the right to do that to protect innocent lives and freedom of navigation. Our desired outcome, of course, is for the Houthis to desist and to de-escalate the situation. What they are doing is unacceptable and illegal, and the onus should be on them to stop it. But we will use all levers at our disposal, including diplomacy and sanctions, to achieve that objective.

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

Sir Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I welcome what my right hon. Friend says about diplomatic and humanitarian efforts, and indeed cutting off the supply of arms. I particularly welcome what he says about the effectiveness of the strikes that have already taken place. However, does he agree that in order to protect civilian shipping, this may need to be a prolonged and persistent targeted campaign alongside our allies?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I want to be absolutely clear that no decision has been taken to embark on a sustained campaign of the nature that he mentioned—these were limited strikes, specifically in response to threats that we perceived—but we do reserve the right to take action in self-defence, as I have said. Crucially, the military action is just one part of a broader strategy, including diplomacy, sanctions and other things; we will use all levers to bring about an end to the disruption and the illegality that the Houthis are causing.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Scottish National party.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Freedom of navigation is not a choice: it is a necessity, not least because of the impact there could be on all the people we are very fortunate to represent. As such, as a point of principle it is fair for the Government to use proportionate and robust action to defend that right to freedom of navigation. However, all of us in this Chamber need to be mindful of the opponent that we face in this regard. The Houthis have been under almost constant bombardment from Saudi Arabia for the best part of

eight years; they did not get that message, so why are we so confident that they will get our message this time around?

That, of course, leads to the wider question: what is the ultimate strategy going forward, in relation not just to the Houthis but to the wider region? Over the past week, we have seen missile strikes in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, Syria and, of course, Yemen. In the meantime, we continue to see the complete destruction of Gaza and, of course, Hamas continue to obtain hostages. We need to understand the Government's strategy to calm waters not just in the Red sea but right across the region. Surely that must begin with a ceasefire in Gaza.

The Prime Minister: As difficult as the situation is, to do nothing would also be a choice. I believe that would be the wrong choice because it would be tantamount to ceding control of a global, economically vital shipping route to a dangerous militant group that is backed by Iran, and it would put innocent lives at risk. The hon. Gentleman is right that the military action should sit within a broader strategy, which hopefully he can tell from my statement we are engaged in on all fronts.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about Israel and Gaza, as I have made clear, no one wants to see this conflict go on for a moment longer than necessary. An immediate pause is necessary to get aid in and hostages out—that is what we have been calling for. The best outcome will be moving from that pause to a sustainable ceasefire, but, as I was clear about in my statement, a number of things need to happen for that to be possible, including the release of all the hostages by Hamas, Hamas no longer being in charge in Gaza and an agreement for the Palestinian Authority to return to Gaza to provide governance. That is a conversation we have been having, and we will continue to push for that, because I believe that will be the best outcome and it is one that is widely supported by, I would imagine, everyone in this House.

Mr Speaker: Just to help the House, some people were late, and we are only going to run this for an hour, so please try to help each other by being as quick as you can. I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I welcome the airstrikes, which were conducted solely to re-establish freedom of maritime movement. However, there are a number of Iranian proxies and allied groups operating across the middle east, and the hand of Iran is clear in their activities. Iran is the fundamental threat to UK security and to stability in the region. What is the strategic approach and intent to comprehensively reduce the threat that we face from all the proxies and allies, so that we do not end up playing whack-a-mole? Have we seen any opportunism from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or Daesh, who are also on the ground in Iran? Finally, as the Prime Minister touched on Gaza-Israel, please may I reiterate my request for the UK to launch a contact group for Palestine, so that we can launch track 2 negotiations to get some progress towards stability and a two-state solution?

The Prime Minister: The behaviour of the Iranian regime, including the actions of the IRGC, poses a significant threat to the safety and security of the

United Kingdom and our allies, particularly given Iran's direct threats against people here in the UK, as well as its destabilising influence in the region. We are alive to the threat, which is why we have already sanctioned more than 400 Iranian individuals, including the IRGC in its entirety. The National Security Act 2023 provides new measures for our police and security services to counter the hostile influence that we see.

The Foreign Secretary spoke to his Iranian counterpart last week, and we will continue that diplomacy this week. As I pointed out in my statement, we have previously interdicted the supply of Iranian missiles being smuggled to the Houthis, last year and the year before. We need to ensure that we work with our allies to do that, because the flow of those weapons to the Houthis is critical to their ability to carry out these attacks. Working with our allies, we should try to do everything we can to stop that.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrat party.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. As I made clear last week, the Liberal Democrats accept the case for limited strikes against the Houthis, as long as they remain limited. As the Prime Minister updates the House for the second time on this matter, there is remarkably little clarity about what the next steps are and when the UK's objectives will be judged to have been fulfilled. Nor has the Prime Minister sufficiently addressed how he plans to avoid regional escalation in this most fragile of regions. I thank him for agreeing that the House can debate this matter tomorrow, but will he not give the House the opportunity to vote on this matter, not least given the huge cross-party support for limited strikes? That would surely strengthen the signal he intends to give.

The Prime Minister: What is escalatory is the Houthis ramping up attacks on commercial shipping, launching missiles and drones against US and UK warships, and threatening allied bases in the region. I have been very clear that military action was a last resort. We provided warning after warning, including with allies and at the UN Security Council. The Houthis had, and continue to have, the ability to prevent this by stopping their illegal attacks. As I pointed out earlier, there are also risks to inaction because it would damage international security and the global economy, and send a message that British vessels, lives and interests are fair game, none of which I think is acceptable.

I am pleased that the House will have an opportunity to debate the matter tomorrow but, as I said, we reserve the right to take action in a limited, proportionate and legal way in self-defence. That is the right thing and the country would expect nothing less from the Government.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and action. On the issue of Iran, can he say what contingency planning has been done in the eventuality that Houthi attacks in the Red sea are followed up by IRGC attacks in the Persian gulf?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right to point out the link between Iran and the Houthis. We are alive to that and I discussed it with President Biden last

night. My right hon. Friend will know that we have assets in the region and we are working closely with our allies to ensure maritime security, whether that is by interdicting arms or more generally ensuring the freedom of navigation. Diplomacy will also have to play a part, which is why the Foreign Secretary's conversations with his Iranian counterpart are so important, but we remain alive to the risks and will do everything we can to reduce them.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Prime Minister is right that to do nothing is not an option, but to do something there needs to be a strategy. If the attacks continue and there is continued disruption to maritime trade, does he have a plan B?

The Prime Minister: That is why we are working extensively with our allies, broadening the international coalition of support condemning the Houthis' behaviour, and putting pressure on them in all different ways. It is important that military action is not seen in isolation: it sits alongside wider diplomatic and economic strategies. As I said, we will bring forward new sanctions measures, together with our allies, in the coming days.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I express my full support for the action that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has approved. Will he extend his strategic objectives, because it seems that this threat will remain so long as the Houthis have a safe haven to operate from? It is a question of how we deal with that part of Yemen, which is effectively an ungoverned space.

The Prime Minister: It is clear that the Houthis' behaviour is damaging the people of Yemen. We have talked previously about the importance of the supply of food into Yemen, but the destruction of oil infrastructure also deprives the Yemeni people of key revenue. These are all topics with which we are engaged with our Saudi partners. We very much support the negotiations. As my hon. Friend knows, a deal was announced in December. We would like to see a lasting peace and security for the Yemeni people for an inclusive political settlement, and I can assure him that, diplomatically, we are working very hard to achieve that aim.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The Prime Minister rightly states that the majority of this House supports a two-state solution to bring a lasting peace, but that is clearly not shared by the Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu, members of his far-right Cabinet, or the Israeli ambassador to the UK, who openly advocated genocide on the UK airwaves. They have all rejected an independent state of Palestine. Will the Prime Minister make it clear to the Israeli Prime Minister that he condemns his comments, which stand in the way of peace? Will he also condemn the vile comments of the Israeli ambassador, who labelled every building in Gaza as a legitimate target for the Israeli military?

The Prime Minister: The Foreign Secretary will be in the region this week and will reiterate what I have said publicly and from this Dispatch Box: we are absolutely committed to a two-state solution. We believe that is the right outcome for the people in the region. We want Palestinians and Israelis to be able to live side by side in peace, security and dignity, and we will redouble our efforts to bring about that outcome.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Yemen is a complex, war-torn and troubled country that has never really settled since the north and south united in 1990. Today, the civil war means that two thirds of the population require humanitarian support. When I was Minister for the middle east, I spent a lot of time with the United Nations, the US and Gulf nations trying to build a suitable governance and security framework. Does the Prime Minister agree that, unless our attention on Yemen includes not only removing the immediate threat in the Red sea, but a fresh and more cognitive approach to resolving the longer-term governance issues in this troubled country, the threat will remain?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his previous efforts. As he knows, we are a penholder on Yemen in the UN, and we continue to use our diplomatic and political influence to support UN efforts to bring about that lasting peace to Yemen for an inclusive political settlement. The British people can be proud of what we are doing to support the Yemeni people from a humanitarian perspective. We have committed more than £1 billion in aid since the conflict began in 2014. I believe that this year we will be the fourth or fifth largest donor to the UN's appeal.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): What assessment has the Prime Minister made of the risks if the Houthis move to a different part of Yemen, and how many civilian casualties have there been so far?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to say that all our intelligence suggests that there were no civilian casualties from the strikes that we conducted last week, and that will of course have been our intention this time. We are very careful to take the time to pick the targets and minimise any civilian casualties and impacts. As I have said, we believe that there were none last time, and we have no evidence to suggest that there were any this time, but of course that is just an initial assessment.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the update and the continued humanitarian aid to Yemen. I totally agree with the action that he has taken to protect shipping. However, can he tell me what truth there is in the rumours that the Houthis may become a proscribed terrorist organisation, as that would have a major impact on any humanitarian aid sent to Houthi-controlled territories, which includes about 70% of the population?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend will know, we do not comment on proscription processes or decisions on any group, so she will appreciate that there is not much that I can say on that. Just to clarify, it is worth pointing out that the United States has designated the Houthi group as “a specially designated terrorist group”, which is different from full proscription.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): At the moment, we see Houthi attacks continuing, the Popular Mobilisation Units attacking US bases in Syria, and Hezbollah in a low-level war with Israel in Lebanon. Yesterday in Gaza 24 members of the Israeli military were killed, and 24,000 Palestinians have died—*[Interruption.]* It is now 25,000, we are told. This morning we heard how a doctor is amputating children's limbs in Gaza without anaesthetics. Does the Prime

Minister not realise that, without an immediate ceasefire, any hope of a strategy succeeding will fail, and that the Netanyahu Cabinet has now become an obstacle to peace, rather than a partner in peace?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, no one wants to see the conflict in Gaza go on for a moment longer than is necessary. An immediate pause is now needed to get aid in and hostages out. The best outcome will be moving from that pause to a sustainable ceasefire, but that sustainable, permanent ceasefire does require a set of conditions for it to be truly sustainable and permanent, and that involves the release of all hostages and Hamas having no role in Gaza, particularly to fire rockets continually into Israel. That is the sustainable ceasefire that we are pushing for.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If the Houthis persist, have we the capability to remove the threat, and will we do it?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend can see, we will always back up our words with action. We have been clear that we will not tolerate risk to innocent lives and British interests in the region. We will take action where necessary in a limited and proportionate way, in compliance with international law and in self-defence. That is what we did last week and what we have done this week, and we will always reserve the right to do so in order to protect British lives and interests.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It is clear that the “Partisans of God”—the Houthi militia—are fascist and racist. They are backed by fascists and racists in Tehran. Further to earlier questions—this has been asked time and again from both sides of the House—may I ask when we will get around to fully proscribing the IRGC?

The Prime Minister: As I have said previously, we do not routinely comment on groups that we may or may not be considering for proscription, but we have taken significant action against the IRGC, including sanctioning them in their entirety and passing new laws here at home to make sure that we can protect ourselves. Critically, we are working with our allies so that we can jointly determine what is the most effective way to combat the risk that Iran poses to us.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister on a robust response—the right to navigate is indisputable—but the damage has already been done. Tankers are avoiding the Gulf of Aden, the Red sea and the Suez canal. Freight rates are now soaring and the impact of that on European refineries is likely to be significant. Can the Prime Minister say more about what will be done for armed convoys and how we will restore confidence that people and vessels will be able to navigate that stretch of water?

The Prime Minister: The Transport Secretary has been engaging extensively with the industry. My hon. Friend will have seen the statements from leading shipping companies after last week's strike, saying that they welcomed action being taken to restore security. I also point him to Operation Prosperity Guardian, a coalition of more than 20 countries. More are now sending assets into the region to ensure the safety of all civilian and

commercial shipping through the Red sea. It is a critical economic strait, but there is also a principle at stake, which we must defend.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The war in Gaza and the situation in the middle east are worsening every day. We know that more than 25,000 people have been killed, including 10,000 children, not to mention about 135,000 children suffering from severe malnutrition. We know that the only way to de-escalate the violence in Gaza and the crisis in the Red sea is by securing an immediate ceasefire—not a pause, but an immediate ceasefire. Why will the Prime Minister not commit to calling for this, so that we can see an end to this humanitarian catastrophe and the killing of innocent children?

The Prime Minister: I point the hon. Lady to my previous comments on that topic, but I will also just highlight that we have trebled our aid commitment for this financial year. We are working with partners in the region to increase the amount of aid going into the region. I discussed that with President Biden yesterday, because we recognise the humanitarian impact that the conflict is having. The UK is playing a leading role in getting more humanitarian aid into the region. As I have said, right now we will work with the Americans on opening up Ashdod so that we have a new maritime corridor to increase the flow.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the Prime Minister for his resolute work, including the wider update on humanitarian aid and work to release hostages. Families of hostages and those hostages released will be suffering unconscionable long-term psychological trauma. Can we, in addition to physical aid, look at providing psychological support and expertise from the UK wherever it is needed for all those so gravely impacted?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent point. Like her, I have spent time with hostage families, including just yesterday, and she is right about the trauma that they are experiencing. Every family that we are in contact with will have dedicated support from the Foreign Office to provide them with what they need, and I will continue to ensure that the issue she raises gets the attention it deserves. She highlights the importance of pauses and ceasefires to ensuring the unconditional release of all the hostages. They and their families are undergoing something that no one would wish to have happen to them, and it is important that we prioritise them in all these conversations.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I and many others will be disappointed at the Prime Minister's failure to condemn the increasingly violent and extreme language by Netanyahu and his Ministers, and I invite him again to do so. The Prime Minister said 10 days ago that the airstrikes against Houthi targets would send a clear message. The Foreign Secretary said this morning that more strikes send the clearest message. Can the Prime Minister tell us where that will end, given that the only message actually being received in the region, whether he likes it or not, is about the UK's failure to back an end to the suffering in Gaza?

The Prime Minister: Again, I urge the hon. Lady not to link and conflate these two things, because—

Caroline Lucas: It is not me!

The Prime Minister: She is right: it is the Houthis who are doing that, and it is right that we call that out as being wrong, as the Government of Yemen themselves have done. It is absolutely right that we take necessary and proportionate action in self-defence against risk to British lives and interests. That is what we did last week and what we have done this week, and we will always reserve the right to do so. In parallel and separately, we are also doing everything we can to bring about more aid into Gaza and a sustainable ceasefire there that involves a release of hostages and the end of Hamas's hostilities.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and actions of self-defence against the Houthis as the right thing to do. Over the past 24 hours, the BBC has carried reports that senior IRGC generals have made extremist speeches to United Kingdom students that are riddled with antisemitism and the promotion of violence. This radicalisation simply must stop. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to end IRGC infiltration in the United Kingdom? While I fully acknowledge that he will not comment on proscription at the Dispatch Box, will he at least acknowledge the strength of feeling on both sides of the House and across the political divide for the proscription of the IRGC, which is behind so much of the violence in the region, including the barbaric attacks of 7 October and the continuing attacks in the Red sea?

The Prime Minister: I first stress that it is an absolute priority to protect the UK against foreign interference, and we will use all available levers to do that. On the particular matter my hon. Friend raises about those reports, I know the Charity Commission has opened an ongoing compliance case into trusts linked to the Kanoon Islamic centre, so it is right that that investigation happens properly. More broadly, universities have a duty to prevent people being drawn into terrorism, and where there is evidence that universities are failing in that duty, I am happy to reassure him that the Government will not hesitate to intervene to ensure that the right steps are taken.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I, too, share concerns about what the strategy is, what the contagion to the rest of the middle east will be, and the possibility that might be bolstering the Houthis' position in Yemen. Can I ask the Prime Minister about a constituent's partner, who I mentioned to the Leader of the House last Thursday? He has been awaiting evacuation from south Gaza for a number of months. He has now suffered a broken leg and is receiving no healthcare. I urge the Prime Minister to liaise with the Israeli and Egyptian authorities for his immediate evacuation—it cannot carry on.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do that, and I will follow up with the Leader of the House on the hon. Lady's case.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): The threat to maritime shipping in the Red sea is from not just Houthi missiles, but the threat of cyber-attacks

[James Morris]

often coming from Iranian proxies. Does the Prime Minister agree that there is an urgent need to strengthen the cyber-resilience of our maritime partners, to ensure that they are not susceptible to the threat of cyber-attack, which may disable them and cause multiple problems?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and that is why we previously created and funded the National Cyber Security Centre, on which our allies respect us for showing global leadership. His point is well made, and I will ensure that we are spreading our best practice to allies in the region.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): The key to addressing violence is to address the root cause, not just its manifestations. The Red sea is inextricably linked to the events in Gaza. Rather than bombing the Houthis, who have been bombed for a decade by Saudi Arabia with the best military equipment that Britain and America could sell to it, is it not time that we supported South Africa and other countries at the International Court of Justice in addressing the root cause, which is the genocide unfolding in Palestine?

The Prime Minister: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman, and we disagree with what South Africa has brought to the ICJ and do not believe that it is helpful. I also disagree with him that those two things are linked. The Houthis have carried out attacks on multiple ships from different countries, many of which have nothing to do with the situation in Israel and Gaza. As the Government of Yemen themselves have pointed out, the attacks have nothing to do with that situation, which the Houthis are using as propaganda for their own selfish ends.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has referred to the international support for the actions in the Red sea, but why have only US and UK forces actually taken part in them?

The Prime Minister: We also received support from Canada, Australia, the Netherlands and Bahrain in these strikes, as we did last time. I point the right hon. Gentleman to the statements that have been put out previously by over a dozen countries, including New Zealand, Korea, Singapore and others, and also to the UN Security Council resolution from 10 January, which was unequivocal in condemning the Houthi attacks and acknowledging the right of member states, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): We now have 25,000 dead. There are still 130 hostages. My extended family are still trapped. While we want to have hope, I dare say that it has now turned to complete despondency. The Prime Minister will have heard with dismay, I am sure, the words of Netanyahu when he said that he is categorically against two states. That echoes the equally awful words of Hamas, who say the same thing. Does the Prime Minister not agree that what we have here are the extremes of the debate? What words of hope does he have to offer those voices in Israel, Palestine and beyond who cling on desperately for the light in this darkness?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and comments. I agree that we are committed to a two-state solution, because that is the only way we can bring about a future where Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side with the security they deserve, with dignity and with opportunity. The events of the last few months remind us that we must redouble our efforts to bring about that outcome. I remain confident, because of the engagement that we are having, that we can make progress on that aim.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister said, “We urge the Houthis, and those who enable them, to stop these illegal and unacceptable attacks.” He then spoke only about Iran in terms of those who enable them. Who else is enabling the Houthis, and what action are the UK and its allies taking to stop them and their supply of weapons and other support to the Houthis?

The Prime Minister: I particularly mentioned Iran with good reason, because it is one of the primary suppliers of weapons to the Houthis. That is why in the past we have interdicted those shipments. Iran’s behaviour remains of primary concern to us. It is the significant destabilising actor in the region, and it will continue to be a focus of our diplomatic efforts. More broadly, we want to see peace and stability in the region across the board. Diplomatically and otherwise, we will work hard to bring that about.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Further violence will not achieve peace. Aid agencies are warning that the UK and the US continuing to bomb Yemen is threatening civilian populations and inhibiting humanitarian assistance reaching millions who are already enduring starvation. Instead of escalating risks to civilian populations in the region, why can the Prime Minister not just support the growing and increasing calls internationally for an immediate ceasefire in Israel-Gaza, an end to the bloodshed in Gaza and an end to the attacks on Yemen, and call for peace, justice and human rights?

The Prime Minister: Again, I would not draw a link between the action in the Red sea and the situation in Gaza. They are two completely different things. The Houthis may seek to link them, but we should not pander to that narrative. We have been in touch with our non-governmental organisation partners, and they have confirmed no significant disruption to humanitarian efforts following our airstrikes. We help feed around 100,000 Yemenis every single month. Again, I would urge the hon. Lady to recognise that the Houthis’ activities actually damage the Yemeni people, who are entirely reliant on food coming in through those shipping lanes.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The Prime Minister sketched out some of the Government’s view on terms for a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza. What steps are the Government taking to discuss with other states—particularly with friendly states—a long-term peace plan for the region, including a two-state solution, to ensure that we make real progress towards that objective?

The Prime Minister: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are having exactly that conversation with all our partners and allies in the region. I started that dialogue

when I visited the region towards the end of last year, the Foreign Secretary will be in the region again this week, and it is something that President Biden and I have discussed. I believe that we are aligned on the future that we all want to see for the people of Israel and Gaza, and now we will work constructively with our allies to try to ensure that that can happen.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): May I press the Prime Minister a little more on Palestine? Although he was right to say in his statement that President Biden and he are united in support of a two-state solution, he will be acutely aware that the person who is likely to be President Biden's main challenger in November's election is almost certainly not in favour of a two-state solution, and neither is the Israeli Prime Minister. What are the Prime Minister and the British Government doing to use this narrow window of opportunity to push for that two-state solution?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous answer. We are absolutely committed to a two-state solution and will work very hard with all our allies to make progress towards that aim.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Yemeni analyst Hisham Al-Omeisy is no friend of the Houthis—they took him hostage some time ago—but he has been raising concerns about the way in which these blunt military actions will play into the Houthi narrative against America and the UK. How does the Prime Minister intend to challenge that political narrative and ensure that the Yemeni people do not play into Houthi hands because of the action that he is taking?

The Prime Minister: As I say, we are in dialogue with the Yemeni Government, and they are doing their best to counter the narrative that the hon. Lady mentions. Also, I would not characterise these as “blunt” strikes; they are actually very deliberate and careful targeted strikes on military sites, minimising the impact on civilians. We will continue to ensure that that point is heard loud and clear.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Houthis have already said that we should “expect a response” to the strikes. Benjamin Netanyahu's words have further inflamed things, jeopardising opportunities for peace between Israel and Palestine. There have been attacks in Pakistan by Iran. Clearly, the situation is escalating. We need all partners to collaborate as best we can if we are to secure a ceasefire, end the attacks on shipping and get that two-state solution. The Prime Minister has talked about talking to our allies. Will he set out the conversations that he has had with colleagues in the European Union, which has its own peace initiative in the region, and where does he think that will get to?

The Prime Minister: I speak regularly to colleagues across Europe, including speaking to the Belgian Prime Minister just this morning. We will work with all our allies on these issues, as we have done in the past and will continue to do. I believe that we are all united on the outcome we want to see, which is a two-state solution in which Israelis and Palestinians can live side by side with peace, security and dignity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Prime Minister's statement and his clear, firm stance—it is good to have that. What steps will he take to further secure safe passage for shipping companies, which have been forced to increase the price of shipping in order to enhance their protection? Even Church missions in my constituency sending humanitarian containers to Eswatini in southern Africa are paying increased prices for containers. What else can be done to alleviate not only this international affront but the direct impact on our constituents, who are already struggling with increased prices and stagnant wages?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out the economic impact of attacks on shipping on everyone here at home and across the world. There is a meaningful economic cost to container ships rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope. That is an important reason why we must have freedom of navigation and it demonstrates why it is right that we take action. Prosperity Guardian is the operation providing more maritime security in the area.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): To follow up on the Prime Minister's comments on Gaza, 25,000 people have now been killed there, so is it not time that our Government did more than express sympathies and instead used their diplomatic power to prevent more deaths there, starting with a UN Security Council motion calling for an immediate ceasefire and ending arms sales to Israel?

The Prime Minister: Our actions are clear: we have trebled our aid commitment this year, we are doing everything we can to open more crossings, and recently we worked to deliver a new humanitarian land corridor from Jordan into Gaza, with 750 tonnes of lifesaving food and aid arriving on its first delivery. We can be proud of the impact that we are having, but of course, there is more to do, and that is why we will continue to have those conversations to get more aid in.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that he supports a two-state solution. That requires his Government to recognise the state of Palestine alongside the state of Israel. When will he do that?

The Prime Minister: The position of this Government is the same as that of previous Governments and is long-standing: we will recognise a Palestinian state at a time that best serves the peace process.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): There are 21 million people starving and in desperate need of food and aid in Yemen. How will the Prime Minister ensure that the military action taken by the British Government does not impede that desperately needed humanitarian support?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to my previous answer. In fact, the Houthis' disruption of Red sea shipping is harming the Yemeni people, who are relying on those corridors to bring aid in. As I said, we are the fourth or fifth largest donor to the UN appeal this year, we have contributed £1 billion since the conflict began in 2014, and we are currently helping to feed 100,000 people in Yemen every month.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It will surely be of great concern that the Royal Navy is now almost too small to carry out its many responsibilities, including those that the Prime Minister has told us about today. Can he assure the House that that important issue will be placed at the top of the agenda at the next defence review?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman that the MOD is receiving significant extra funds—£24 billion at the last spending review, and billions of pounds since—to rebuild stockpiles and ensure the sustainability of our defence nuclear enterprise. In particular, the Royal Navy has a very ambitious capital programme. As he can see, it has successfully carried out the operations that we need it to carry out, and it deserves our thanks and praise for its work.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Prime Minister spoke about maritime security in the region, particularly in relation to stemming illegal arms getting into Yemen. How will the UK's ability to contribute to wider maritime security be affected by considerations of decommissioning HMS Westminster and HMS Argyll after multimillion-pound refits, and when will we make a final decision on whether to mothball HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman can see, we absolutely have the capabilities and personnel we need to contribute to allied operations such as Prosperity Guardian, and to take action in self-defence, as we have done. We will always ensure that our armed forces have the investment that they need, and under this and previous Governments they have continued to receive very significant investment, which is set to rise in the years ahead.

Tributes to Sir Tony Lloyd

1.28 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed with the business, I would like to take the opportunity to remember our late colleague Sir Tony.

I first met Tony almost 30 years ago when I was standing as a candidate in Chorley in the 1997 election. Tony was shadow Foreign Affairs Minister. He came along to Chorley and to Adlington—the village I live in—where, on Sutton Lane, he knocked on doors. I have to say that it was his charm, passion and good humour that helped convince those wavering voters to vote for me, so I am forever in his debt.

Of course, Tony had been in the Commons for quite some time before me. In total, he served the people of Greater Manchester for 45 years. He was first elected as a member of Trafford Council in 1979, and, in 1983, he was elected to this House as the Member for his home town of Stretford. In 1997, he was returned for Manchester Central. By that time, he had been part of the Labour Front-Bench team for over a decade, and Tony Blair appointed him Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, serving under Robin Cook. He remained active in international affairs after leaving the FCO as leader of the UK delegations to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Western European Union and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. He was chair of the parliamentary Labour party from 2006 to 2012, the longest-serving holder of that role during that last Labour Government.

He stood down as a Member of Parliament to become the first elected police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester, but in 2017, he returned to the House as the Member of Parliament for Rochdale. Tony remained an active Member of the House until very recently. In one of his final speeches in this House, just last month, he concluded by saying:

“I think the message that has come across today is that we must fight for the change that we want to see take place.”—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 184WH.]

That is a fair summary of Tony's attitude to public service: he was truly a great Member of Parliament. However, although he took politics seriously, Tony did not take himself seriously. He had a very dry—even mischievous—sense of humour, but overwhelmingly, he left an impression of kindness and decency on those who dealt with him.

Tony was an impressive Member of Parliament—he was an impressive person—but his politics were shaped by his mother. His father died young; his mother introduced him into the Labour movement, and it was the Labour movement that shaped the person we are talking about today. I will always be in awe of his kindness, his generosity, and the support that he always gave me. Even on that day as he came out of hospital, Tony was thinking of others. I was pleased to have had the chance to have a chat with him, to share a few jokes and reminisce a bit, but one of the most difficult things you have to do is phone somebody whose life is coming to an end, and I wondered how I could make that phone call. Typical of Tony, he made it so easy for me. He was that kind of person: he put me at ease when it was meant to be the other way around. That is the person we are talking about. He made sure that it was not a

difficult conversation. I did not know that that would be the last time we would ever speak, but I am so glad that we did.

We have not only lost a great colleague and friend; the country has lost one of its nicest and most effective MPs. However, while we in this House and those who worked for him mourn his loss, our thoughts are with his family, who are watching today's tributes from the Gallery: his wife Judith, his children and his granddaughters. I hope the tributes will give them some comfort in the knowledge that Tony was much loved by all sides of the House. May you rest in peace, dear Tony.

I now call the Leader of the Opposition.

1.32 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The death of Sir Tony Lloyd last week was a great loss to so many people on the Labour Benches and beyond, but the sadness we feel pales in comparison with the grief that Tony's family are going through. Our hearts are with them, and I am pleased that some of Tony's family are in the Gallery today: his wife Judith, his children Angharad, Siobhan, Kieron and Alexandria, his son-in-law Paul, his nephew Sean—who I know was like a son to him—and of course his sister Vivian. Like you, Mr Speaker, I hope they can take some comfort in the memories and tributes of colleagues today, and I hope they see just how much Tony was loved and respected here in this House and how much he managed to achieve in his decades of public service.

I first met Tony when I was Director of Public Prosecutions and he was the police and crime commissioner in Greater Manchester. We were at a sexual assault referral clinic in Greater Manchester, St Mary's, which works with organisations and individuals committed to combating violence against women and girls, providing safe places for women and girls to report what has happened to them. It is an incredible model, and I saw at first hand Tony's commitment to tackling violence against women and girls. What really struck me when I met him for that first time was that he had the heart of a true public servant: not grandstanding, not pretending that he had all the answers, but quietly and respectfully working with others to deliver.

Like others, I have been deeply moved to read and hear the many tributes to Tony, not just from Labour Members but from Members across the House. I thank Members across the House for the comfort that the tributes they have paid will have given Tony's family. Tributes have also been paid by those from the trade union movement, because Tony was a committed trade unionist, and by people who met Tony in his decades of public service. Like you, Mr Speaker, it meant a great deal to me personally to have had the opportunity to speak directly to Tony when he left hospital for the last time, the Thursday before he died, Thursday week ago. I was able to convey to him at first hand the high esteem in which he was held by everyone, which I hope gave him some comfort and support in those final days.

Tony was held in special high esteem by his staff: Jacob, Iftikhar, Beverley, Arjeera, Megan and Chris, and of course Tricia, his close friend and political confidante in Rochdale. Indeed, many of those in Tony's tight-knit group of friends used to work for him, and I know that they were by his side in his final days. That

is a true tribute to Tony: he treated people as kindly and warmly behind closed doors as he did publicly, and he treated those who worked for him with the respect and dignity he expected everybody to be treated with.

Some Members of the House know that Tony followed the reds on two fronts: he was committed to the Labour party, but he was also a passionate supporter of Manchester United. Tony and I agreed on a lot of things, but not on that. As we all know, though, his love for Manchester went beyond football. A former Irish ambassador who I have got to know well, and who worked closely with Tony when he was the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, remembered receiving from Tony what he described as a

"whimsical Mancunian take on Irish history",

showing not just Tony's typical knowledge of his subject but the great sense of humour and poignancy that he was known for.

Across the country, Tony had a huge impact as the MP for Rochdale; across the United Kingdom, he championed co-operation, collaboration and communities; and across the world, he promoted peace, chairing Labour Friends of Ukraine and supporting human rights and democracy in Belarus. However, he still always had the time for the little things that matter so much to Members of this House—a friendly word and some encouragement, with that twinkle in his eye that everybody who has ever met him knows and will remember.

Just a few days before he died, Tony published what would turn out to be his final article in his local paper. He wrote about his hopes for 2024—for peace in the middle east and across the world. He wrote of the need to help the NHS off its knees, particularly having just experienced its care first hand. He wrote of the importance of action on climate change to make sure that we can pass our planet on to our children, and he wrote about education and the need to invest in young people. Tony might not be able to lead the fight for that better world he hoped for, but those of us he leaves behind will, and we will have him in mind as we continue to fight for the causes he was passionate about, the values he lived, and the people he served throughout his entire life. May he rest in peace. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

1.39 pm

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Last week, the whole House was deeply saddened by the loss of one of our longest-serving and most respected Members, Sir Tony Lloyd. I offer my sincere condolences and those of the whole Government to his wife, Judith, their children and grandchildren, and all of his friends and family.

Tony and I of course came from different political traditions, but I deeply respected him as a man of great integrity, compassion and humour, a gentle, but fierce advocate for his constituents and his values, and a dedicated parliamentarian. He loved this House, he said, for the "shenanigans of the place", and it has said everything about his pragmatic and warm approach to politics that we have heard and will hear so many heartfelt tributes to him from all sides of this House.

For Tony, politics was always about people. That began, of course, with his constituents in Rochdale and his home city of Manchester. Born in Stretford, within cheering distance of his beloved Old Trafford, he spent

[*The Prime Minister*]

36 years as a Member of Parliament and served as a police and crime commissioner, truly living up to his nickname, Mr Manchester.

Tony gave an interview while recovering from covid that gives us the full measure of the man. All of Tony's humanity is there—his empathy, his values. He talked of watching a young nurse gently feeding an old man opposite, reflecting, in his words,

“that there is more to life than the next parcel from Amazon. It's what binds us as a human family really. That enormous decency.”

Tony was an enormously decent man, who gave his life to public service. From local government to crime, Northern Ireland and, perhaps most enduringly, foreign affairs, he was a principled and tireless public servant who made a real difference to the lives of people here and around the world.

Mr Speaker, as you said, in his penultimate contribution in this House, Tony said that

“change can happen, and...we must fight for the change that we want to see”.—[*Official Report*, 7 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 184WH.]

From the beginning of his career right to the end, Tony Lloyd lived those words. He was a great family man, a great man of Manchester and a great man of the House of Commons. He will be missed, but he and the change he fought for and achieved will never be forgotten. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

1.41 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I want to send our sincere condolences to Tony's family from the SNP Benches.

I also want to say a few words personally about Tony. I did not know him very well, but I have one very vivid recollection. One evening, in the covid tent that was set up on the terrace, I went to meet an SNP colleague for a little light refreshment, and at the table with her were Tony Lloyd and Stephen Pound. Mr Speaker, we almost got thrown out of that covid tent—not because we were drinking so much, but because we were laughing so much. I think every time someone said something, either Stephen or Tony, maybe a wee bit myself and my colleague, just capped each other, and those who were in that tent probably remember the racket. Everyone—everyone—was looking at us and wondering what it was we found so funny. I cannot remember what it was we found so funny, but it was just one of those evenings where you go away feeling better. Thereafter, every time I met Tony, he spoke to me.

I probably fully understand what Tony's family are going through, having been widowed myself. My late husband used to say, “Marion, hen, most people get into politics to help other people”. I think that was Tony, and I am so glad I met him. I spoke to him very recently in the Chamber, and he gave me his lovely smile, nodded and asked me how I was—and the day felt better. It is a bit presumptuous of me to say that things get better, but I know they do. I also know that it is always best to look back and remember those we love who are gone with a smile, and I am sure that will be easy in time for Tony's family.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

1.43 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): One of the interesting quotations in Wikipedia has Tony Lloyd's words:

“the basic morality of politics was instilled in me. I have always thought if not fighting for what's right and just, then what is politics for?”

My recommendation to anybody coming into this place, and one I try to take myself, is to try to earn the tributes that Tony Lloyd has earned.

1.44 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): When we have the sad duty to pay tribute to hon. or right hon. Members, it is often the case that the facts get gilded, in a sense, to help the family. There is absolutely no need to embellish the facts when it comes to Tony. Quite simply, Tony was a decent man, who dedicated his life to public service.

Tony was first elected to Trafford Council on the same day that Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, which meant that his first 18 years as an elected representative were probably more difficult than most people's first 18 years. He very soon, four years after he had been elected as a councillor, became the Member of Parliament for Stretford, and I want to mention two things about that. It meant that he represented Manchester United and Manchester City—both grounds were in that constituency—and Tony, who was fair with all his constituents all his life, was I suspect not completely even-handed between the Reds and the Blues at Manchester. He was delighted to go into the directors' box at Old Trafford, and I think the last early-day motion he put down was a very good tribute to Bobby Charlton when he passed away recently. One of the sadnesses of Tony passing is that he campaigned against, and led a debate in Westminster Hall on, the Glazers' parasitic ownership of Manchester United, and as the Glazers are on the way out, I think Tony would have been delighted to see their demise.

When Tony became the MP for Stretford, which included Moss Side, I became leader of the council shortly afterwards, and we both had to deal with many of the problems that there were in Moss Side at that time. I think it would be fair to say that Tony worked tirelessly to improve the relationships between the different communities and the public services in Moss Side, because we were still in the aftermath of the 1981 riots in Moss Side. I think it is also fair to say—he took this into his job later as police and crime commissioner—that he was not a supporter of James Anderton's rather brutal tactics in Moss Side, and he saw it as part of his job to improve relations between the communities, not to make them worse.

Tony took a similar attitude when he moved to Manchester Central. Although he loved representing Manchester United, he was always the political realist, and he could see that there was likely to be a much larger majority in Manchester Central than there was in Stretford, so he moved to Manchester Central. Again, he had a difficult ward in Cheetham, and he dedicated his time to improving relations in that ward. He never said this to me directly, but I think it was his experience

of seeing the damage that poor policing could do that motivated him to become the police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester.

In some ways more importantly, Tony was the first non-elected mayor for Greater Manchester to use those skills of bringing communities together in bringing the 10 local authorities of Greater Manchester together. Greater Manchester has a reputation for the authorities working together, but that does not just happen on its own. Authorities are often jealous of each other, leaders of councils are jealous of Members of Parliament and they are certainly jealous of mayors, elected or not, and Tony used his skills to bring people together.

Tony was calm, which does not mean he always toed the party line: on Iraq and Trident, for instance, I was pleased to walk through the Lobby with him. He did not agree with the current Labour party policy on the middle east, but again it was done in a calm and thoughtful way. And when the war memorial in Rochdale was desecrated with pro-Palestinian, anti-British Government writing and by people chanting racist, antisemitic slogans, Tony was the first person to call it out.

This House, the people of Rochdale and the people of Greater Manchester will greatly miss Tony's contribution to our political life.

1.50 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): It is with great sadness that I rise and say goodbye to Tony Lloyd. He was a man of great courtesy, he was a great parliamentarian, and I am so glad that both the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister have paid such fulsome tributes to him.

I much enjoyed his company when I had the opportunity to speak to him, and I also want to recognise his independence of mind, as the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) just said, regarding the question of Iraq, which was a huge issue for those on the Labour side. He spoke for the Labour party with an independence of mind and an authority that certainly attracted me to listen to what he had to say when he spoke.

I would also like to pay tribute to him not only as the Mayor of Greater Manchester but as the Member for Rochdale and, by way of a personal anecdote, I would like to put on record my thanks. In 2017 he helped to organise and spoke at the commemoration of John Bright in Rochdale Quaker cemetery; he played a very important part not only in putting the event together but in the celebration and commemoration that took place afterwards. He recognised the greatness of other people's contributions to the history of Rochdale, such as that of John Bright, and Bright's commitment to democracy. I can only say that as the Member for Rochdale, although sadly no longer, he represented the very best of what John Bright represented when he himself was a Member of Parliament in this country for so long. So I just want to pay tribute to his family—to offer my condolences to Judith and the family—and to say thank you, Tony, for all you did.

1.52 pm

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I hope these heartfelt tributes to Sir Tony Lloyd are a source of comfort to his family. I say to them that those of us who

were lucky enough to know him for a little while knew him to be an absolutely lovely man: kind, and respected in all parts of the House. You should be really proud of him.

I say to the Labour family that I know he was an integral part of the Labour party for so many years and I know you are proud of him, and justifiably so. He stood up for Labour party principles and his own principles as an individual MP representing his constituency.

I have spoken to Liberal Democrat colleagues in Manchester who remember Tony as the sort of person who would reach out to other parties to make sure that the people of Manchester were the prime objective in the work that politicians of all parties were trying to do. It was no surprise that he decided to leave this House to go and be the police and crime commissioner, where he served with real distinction to try to make the lives of everyone in Manchester better. He was a Mancunian at his heart, as we heard from the former leader of the council, the hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer).

I also remember Tony as a strong internationalist; that was a real theme in the work that he did. In his last speech in this House, he was supporting and standing up for the universal declaration of human rights. He voted against the Iraq war. He was an internationalist and put his beliefs into what he did.

My personal experience of Sir Tony from listening to him in this House was that his calm, thoughtful and respectful interventions were often heard in silence because people wanted to hear what he had to say. My particular remembrance is from a cross-party visit to Israel and Palestine in 2009. We went to towns in southern Israel such as Ashkelon, and we went to the west bank and Gaza. We were at the border crossing in Gaza and were not being let in; it was a prearranged trip, but we were not being allowed in and we were there for several hours. We rang the British ambassador; that did not work. But Tony had the idea of ringing the BBC, and within an hour the BBC was reporting that a cross-party group of British MPs was not being allowed into Gaza, and it was amazing how quickly we were allowed in. That showed the measure of Tony: a principled pragmatist, getting through issues, understanding how things worked. My advice to colleagues is when going on foreign trips, always take a former Foreign Office Minister with you, because that comes in quite handy.

We will not forget him; no one who met him—whether constituents, Members of this House or, frankly, anyone around the world who met him—will ever forget Tony. He will live in our hearts and memories.

1.56 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I feel humbled to be able to speak about Tony. He shadowed me when I was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and it was always a pleasure and an honour to be able to have a private conversation with him. Yes, across the Dispatch Box we might have our disagreements, but behind the scenes I knew that we could have a proper, open, frank conversation. And I will say this about conversations with Tony: I learned something from every one of them. Every single time we spoke there was something new—there was a different perspective that Tony gave me, a different way of thinking about things, and he helped me enormously in the task we

[*Dame Karen Bradley*]

both had to try to restore devolved government to Northern Ireland when I was Secretary of State and he shadowed me.

After that time we remained close and would regularly chat about Northern Ireland and what was going on. We often talked about football as well, despite supporting teams from different sides of Manchester. We always had a great conversation and he was always generous and warm and witty.

I was very honoured that last month he was able to co-host with me an event that the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union held to mark the 75th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights. Tony being Tony, he went around every stall; every possible person met Tony, and he was warm, he was kind, he was generous, and they knew that he was engaged and listening to them, which is a rare quality in the people we come across.

Last week the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) and I were both at a BGIPU conference and our admin official was Joe Perry, who is the newest BGIPU recruit. Joe worked in Tony's office for many years and we could see just how much he was affected by the loss of Tony—the shock of it, but also the sense of loss of somebody so special to him, somebody who had given him so much. I am very pleased that the three of us were able to spend a little bit of time to toast Tony; we found somewhere he would have liked and it was nice to be able to raise a glass to a good friend and somebody we will all miss desperately.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call the chair of the parliamentary Labour party, John Cryer.

1.58 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Like you, Mr Speaker, I met Tony about 30 years ago in the run-up to the 1997 general election. I thought then, and have continued to think ever since, what a tolerant and restrained man he was, even when he felt strongly. I have to say I was not particularly tolerant or restrained in those days; I would like to think I learned something from Tony—I think I did over the years.

Those qualities stood him in great stead when he became chair of the parliamentary Labour party. He took over at a time when the tensions—I am being slightly euphemistic—between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were at their sharpest. He was able to guide the PLP through that period.

It is extraordinary to think that when Tony came into this place, Michael Foot was leader of the Labour party. I think I am right that he served under nine Labour leaders. On longevity, I remember Tony telling me many years ago that as a young boy, he saw the Busby babes play, with the great Duncan Edwards. He must have been one of the last people still alive who could say that they saw Manchester United before the Munich crash.

In conclusion, Tony's tolerance and restraint were an exemplar. There are an awful lot of people—not just in here, but outside as well—who could usefully learn a few lessons from Tony.

2 pm

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I add my condolences to those of colleagues; Tony was a man who commanded universal respect across the House and beyond.

Although for most of my time as a Member of Parliament, Tony was a fellow MP, I got to know him best when he was out of the House of Commons as the first Mayor of Greater Manchester, following on from being the police and crime commissioner—indeed, he combined the two. He was appointed on 29 May 2015, two weeks after I had been appointed Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. It was an absolute pleasure to work closely with Tony during those two years. Creating the first big city Mayor outside Greater London was a big deal. It had not been done for many decades, so it was important that it should be a success not only for Greater Manchester, which was going to elect its Mayor, but for the whole country, because we wanted to encourage other great cities across the UK to follow that route.

The first Mayor was crucial. Tony was selected by borough leaders across Greater Manchester, and he proved to be the perfect inaugural Mayor with his easy-going charm and ability to work well not only with the three parties who were leading the boroughs of Greater Manchester, but with a Conservative Government. The experience he had of this place and of ministerial office built the confidence in the role of Mayor of Greater Manchester—the confidence that it could be entrusted with powers and responsibilities devolved from this place. That proved to be a template not just for further devolution to Greater Manchester, but for the whole country.

I enjoyed working with Tony during that time not only because of his courteousness and effectiveness, but due to his tenacity, which colleagues across the House will remember. Without his sure-footed leadership, not only the mayoralty of Greater Manchester but those of other city regions might not have taken root in the way that they have. Tony was not one to trumpet his own attributes and achievements, as has been said, but in those two short years as Mayor of Greater Manchester he created a great legacy, not just for the city of which he was so proud, but for the country as a whole. We send his family our sincere condolences.

2.3 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I first met Tony Lloyd in 1988. My husband Colin and I were looking for help putting on an Amnesty International showing of artwork to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the UN declaration of human rights. I contacted Tony, whom I had not met previously, and he helped us to arrange the showing of those artworks at Manchester central library. We also managed to have a fantastic launch event at the library, featuring Tony and some actors from “Coronation Street”. The wholeheartedness with which he supported what we wanted to do with that event on human rights was typical of Tony.

Tony was the MP for Stretford at the time I became a councillor on Trafford Council. Having been a Trafford councillor himself, as we have heard, Tony was a great mentor for all of us new councillors who were elected

when we won Trafford Council in 1995. I can remember Tony and Judith at our Trafford Labour social events, and in particular his very good salsa dancing.

Tony has a remarkable record of service as an MP in Trafford and Manchester, our police and crime commissioner, the interim Mayor and, most recently, the MP for Rochdale. He was also the long-serving chair of the parliamentary Labour party. In all those roles, Tony had a substantial influence on our political life, particularly in Greater Manchester and the north-west, but more widely in his role as a committed internationalist.

The final thing I want to pay tribute to is Tony Lloyd's sheer decency and humanity. I thank him for his friendship and support across the years, and I want to send love to Judith, his children—Siobhan, Angharad, Kieron and Alexandria—all the family and Tony's staff. We will miss him terribly.

2.4 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I am not going to talk for long, because a lot of people knew Tony better than I did, but for the past four years I had the privilege of sharing a borough with him. I was his constituency neighbour, and a better friend and neighbour you could not ask for.

I was trying to think of anecdotes I could use to sum up how good a friend he was to me, but as has been alluded to, Tony's sense of humour was very dry, which means I cannot repeat quite a few of those anecdotes in the Chamber. I will touch on a couple of incidents. The first was on 13 December, when a bleary-eyed, newly-elected MP for Heywood and Middleton reached out of the bed to grab their phone, which was ringing. It was Tony on the other end, who was clearly in a lot better condition than me. He said, "I think we should probably get together so I can get you up to speed." This was a man who had just been through a tough election, and his first thought was getting his constituents' needs dealt with, because there had been a transition on the other side of the borough. There is a lovely story that comes off the back of that, but it is not repeatable, so Members should find me in Strangers later. It was the mark of the man. If we are talking about the spirit of co-operativism that is Rochdale, Tony embodied that. That service never waned, even when his health did.

Most recently, I spoke with Tony one-on-one at the Holodomor commemorations. Tony did fantastic work with the Ukrainian community, especially in our borough. We were stood there in the freezing cold, and I was close enough to him at that point to ask how his treatment was going, and he started asking questions about how I was doing personally. He was so sanguine about it, and he just kept going. We were exchanging casework pretty much up to the last. This was a man who gave his all for something he really cared about. He was a parliamentarian's parliamentarian, but he was also a fantastic local community representative.

We use a lot of superlatives in this job—we talk about things being awesome, big and grand—but a word that carries a lot more weight for me is "good". Tony did not just do good; he was good.

2.6 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): A lot has been said about our friend Tony Lloyd, such as the service he gave to the people of Greater Manchester

over his long and distinguished career as Trafford councillor, MP for Stretford, MP for Manchester Central, police and crime commissioner for Greater Manchester, interim Mayor of Greater Manchester, MP for Rochdale, Minister, shadow Minister—we can rattle them all off.

Tony was a friend, and somebody who I will miss greatly. I first got to know Tony at the 1992 summer Young Labour residential—I was young once. I am billing it as a residential, but it was actually in Manchester. It was at the GMB National College in Whalley Range. It is now the British Muslim Heritage Centre and the site of the constituency office of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), but back then it was the GMB National College. A number of MPs from across the north-west region and beyond came to talk to all these eager young Labour activists. We were a little dejected, because we had been through a general election that we should have won, but we did not, and the rest is history.

Tony did not just come to the college and chat to us youngsters, but he stayed with us afterwards. Everybody else disappeared—they had more important things to do—but Tony stayed with us, to encourage us to keep up the fight and to stand for what we believe in. He did like a beer, and he even did the karaoke afterwards, but he was all about supporting young people and encouraging them into politics and to chase and follow their dreams. I did not think he would remember, but when I was elected in 2005 as the MP for Denton and Reddish, he came over to me in the Members' Tea Room and said, "I remember you doing karaoke, Andrew." I said, "Well, Tony, I remember you doing karaoke, and it wasn't that great."

Over the last 19 years, we served together in this place. We sat in the shadow Cabinet together. He was a great shadow Northern Ireland Secretary who really believed in reaching out across the communities and bringing people together. He fought for internationalism, whether it was for the people of Colombia, the people of Palestine or the Kashmiri people with whom I did a lot of work with Tony when he was MP for Rochdale. He was a socialist and an internationalist. He believed in social justice. He was an exceptional public servant. He was both a gentle man and a gentleman. God bless you, Tony, and thank you to Judith, the family and the staff for sharing such a lovely man with the Labour party.

2.10 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): I am deeply honoured to speak, as I served with Tony on the International Trade Committee for three years. He was always there to give this young upstart some good, impartial advice. He was kind and generous, and always had a balanced view about what should and should not be done. He had the best interests of Parliament at heart. His was an extraordinary service to Parliament and an extraordinary example to any young Member entering this place.

I wrote to him last year when he fell ill. In the midst of his treatment, he sent back a letter not complaining or uttering anything about his personal circumstances but saying how much he missed being in this place and how much he was looking forward to getting back here. When I saw him a month ago, I was so pleased to be able to have a last word with him and say what an extraordinary example he was to so many.

[Anthony Mangnall]

I thought about what would be an acceptable anecdote to tell. At one point, I said to him, “I’m a bit stuck, Tony. I’ve got a constituency engagement coming up and I’m not entirely sure what the funny story is that I will be able to tell.” I do not know whether this happened to him or was one of those apocryphal stories, but he looked at me and said, “How about this one? I had some constituents come to see me: a mother, a father and a son. They were standing in Central Lobby as the Division bell went, and the Doorkeepers and the police were all shuffling about. The father said to the mother, ‘What’s that? What does that mean?’ Out of nowhere, the boy said, ‘It means one of them has escaped.’” [Laughter.] That was his gift to me—a good sense of humour—and now it is passed on to all hon. Members to use at association events.

Tony was an extraordinary man. I am so pleased and fortunate to have ever been able to meet him. I send my very best to his family.

2.12 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My thoughts are with Tony’s family in the Gallery, and also his staff, past and present. Many of them will be mourning a man who made a great impact in their lives. I knew Tony for well over 25 years as a colleague and a friend. Of course, we shared the two reds idea. I have to say that one of the reds is clearly coming up nicely—and I hope the football team also gets better. [Laughter.]

The other thing that I shared with Tony was our community relations work in Greater Manchester, where I found him incredible. As a colleague and mentor to me when I joined the Labour party, he helped me with many great political challenges and fights, including winning my Cheetham Hill seat from the Lib Dems and the late Qasim Afzal. When I became a Member of the European Parliament, the fight was with Nick Griffin, who represented the north-west. Again, Tony was a star—he knew exactly what needed to be done at the right time and what needed to be said. It was the same when it came to George Galloway—I have had my share from both the left and the right.

I always found Tony to be an absolute gem. With his experience, his balanced ideas and his clarity of thought, I always found myself in a good place. He was an unfailingly warm, friendly and kind individual. He could always be relied on for support, whatever campaign or issue we were working on, and he was always available to intervene in obscure Westminster Hall or Adjournment debates. Despite being gentle and modest, he was a sharp politician who knew exactly how this place worked and how he could use it to get the best for his constituents. I know that because Tony represented Whalley Range—an area in my constituency—and even now, long-term residents still remember him and talk fondly about how he sorted out their housing, their immigration or whatever issues they had some 30 years ago.

As a councillor, a Member of Parliament, a police and crime commissioner and interim Mayor, Tony touched the lives of everyone in Greater Manchester. He will be missed here in Parliament and, most importantly, by people back home in Manchester and Rochdale, whom he never missed an opportunity to champion. May he rest in peace.

2.15 pm

Sir Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to participate. Tony was a calm and decent man and a gentleman. When I was elected in 1997, I was one of two Conservative MPs in Greater Manchester—and in 2001 I was one of one—but, right from the start, Tony was one of those who helped to set the tone for the way in which, regardless of party, we all worked together in the interests of the city and the region. I always valued that enormously. That is an example to all Members of how we serve the wider public and not just our parties or our own interests.

Oddly, then, the other thing I will say in giving my condolences to the family and paying tribute to Tony is that I came across him again in particular in 2010, when I was elected chairman of the 1922 committee and he was the chairman of the parliamentary Labour party. There we both were in our respective party roles, but also finding ourselves working together, perhaps more often than I had ever expected, and I have found that since, with his two successors in my time as chairman of the ‘22. I always valued his advice. It was remarkable how often he was able to give me, as the new boy looking after the 1922 committee, advice and guidance from his experience of dealing with the PLP. He will be missed and he sets an example for us all that I hope will be followed.

2.17 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I wish to pass on my sincere condolences and sympathies to the family of Tony on his passing.

I got to know Tony Lloyd just after his return to the House in 2017, and then when he was appointed as the Labour party’s Northern Ireland spokesperson. A very senior member of the Labour party had the ultimate responsibility when coming to Northern Ireland to meet with the innocent victims of terrorism. Despite my best efforts to get that person to meet them, Tony came to me and said, “I will meet them, Gregory.” I said, “Thank you very much, Tony.”

I arranged a meeting, which was the first time I had been in close proximity to Tony in a meeting with a small group of people, as opposed to in the Chamber. Initially, I felt deeply touched by his empathy, how he listened to the trauma of many people who had suffered at the hands of terror, and how he very calmly and patiently responded to each and every person. I deeply appreciated that, but what struck me even more was that after he finished his term as Labour Front-Bench spokesperson for Northern Ireland and he no longer had that responsibility, one day he sat behind me in the Chamber, tapped me on the shoulder and said, “Gregory, I would like to meet those people again.” He did not have to, he did not need to, but he did. Again, he showed and demonstrated his empathy.

In preparation for these few words, this morning I was reminded of how we should be reminded of all our mortality at this occasion. As the old book says:

“What does God require of us? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.”

2.19 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Tony was one of the best of us: a decent, kind man dedicated to helping people. As we have heard today, often he was

unassuming and he never showboated the brilliant work he did. Such was his commitment to public service, he rarely felt comfortable taking personal credit for the great work he did, preferring to quietly and furiously work in the background to get done what needed to be done. His career was never about him but about the people he was trying to lift up. Because of that, Tony was loved.

There are so many stories and messages of warmth from his friends and colleagues, and I have just a few that I want to share. Ian Stewart, a close friend who was formerly the MP for Eccles and then Mayor of Salford, said:

“Tony phoned me before Christmas (he must have been in hospital when he phoned, although he didn’t mention that). He said he wanted arrange a meal and a drink with me. I explained that Mez was ill and we thought she might have Covid. I suggested that he and I should get together as we regularly did either between Christmas and New Year or early January. He agreed but then calmly said he loved me and Mez and that I should let her know that.

First and foremost Tony was a true and close friend of 50 years. He was a real trade union socialist, with a good heart and a strong desire to help those in need.

He was a Statistician by trade lecturing at the University of Salford when we first met. People were always bemused when they found out he was good at maths. Tony was a product of the post war Labour Government’s Welfare State and Education System. Which he never forgot.

I ran his campaign to become the Chair of the parliamentary trade union group.

I ran his campaign to become the Chair of the parliamentary Labour Party.

I had great respect for him as a politician and dear friend.

In 1988, Tony was the first Politician to be interested in and support the creation of the synergistic social partnership model for good governance and socially just resolution of complex problems.

Tony and I were invited to attend our friend Chan Singh’s inauguration as the Temple President of a Manchester Sikh Temple and we wore Turbans together. We looked the part.

He was part of that small group of politicians who were underestimated; underrated; and underused in Parliament. His quiet, calm manner belied the gut instinct and passionate reaction to inequality and lack of social justice experienced by oppressed communities, whether at work, in the community, in the UK or Sub Saharan Africa. He had been the Minister for Sub Saharan Africa in the Blair Government. He was a genuine internationalist, and understood the real global implications and need to battle against neoliberalism at home and abroad.

A genuine man of the people. And one of the few politicians I will miss sharing a meal and a drink with.”

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who cannot be here today as he is recovering from an operation, asked me to share this funny story:

“He was so special and a warm character but there was also a very naughty side to him and I’d like to share this story about him.

I’d missed breakfast and I was really quite hungry and was hoping the delicious jerk chicken would be on offer and headed off to “The Debate”, the cafeteria in Portcullis House in eager anticipation.

But imagine my disappointment when walking up to the entrance to cafeteria and looking up at menu board to see the row of usually packed canteen serving stations totally empty, no staff and no customers. There’d been some sort of problem and services were disrupted and there’d be no lunch in the Debate today.

I tried to take in the full extent of this lunchtime disaster.

I was standing there, open mouthed in disbelief, with my hand still outstretched in automatic pilot poised to pick up a tray from the pile to put my non existent food on, as if in total denial and unable to compute, whilst simultaneously scouring the sad notice of temporary closure that only served to reinforce my disappointment and with it the dawning realisation that I’d be eating somewhere else today.

I must have had a look on my face of complete bewilderment and disappointment in equal measure, when my friend Tony Lloyd, who had observed my frozen form as he made his way through PCH, quietly walked up to my side, still invisible to me, and said very gently and so caringly, with a wicked twinkle in his eye: ‘is there a daughter we could ring?’

Rest in peace Tony.”

Paul Dennett, the Mayor of Salford, said:

“Sir Tony Lloyd MP was a great man, a person & politician of great integrity, someone who often did the right thing quietly, without fear or favour, a great friend of Salford & its peoples. My thoughts & prayers are with Tony’s family & friends at this time”.

Outside the world of politics, Tony’s real and unending love was for his family, and it was in that context that I first met him. At the age of five, in Stretford, he was my first ever MP, although I did not know that at the time, when I was running around his and his wife Judith’s house, driving everyone mad playing “She-Ra: Princess of Power” with his daughter Siobhan, who was my friend at school. We were usually having a row about who would be in the role of She-Ra that day, causing Tony or Judith to have to come and sort out the problem diplomatically.

I remember a house and family full of love and warmth, and a family who often supported mine. It was only years later that I realised what Tony actually did for a job. That was important because, growing up, there was a tendency to believe that MPs were in some special class of their own, and that people from backgrounds like mine could not be MPs. But Tony was different. He was one of us, a man of the people, and a proud member and supporter of the Irish diaspora in Manchester. He gave me the courage to believe that if he had become an MP and could serve to help people, then maybe—just maybe—people like me could do it, too.

I send all of Salford’s deepest love and prayers to Judith, Siobhan, Angharad, Kieron, Ali, Carmen, Carys and all Tony’s family and loved ones. To Tony, I say: “You were an inspiration to all of us in this place. If we can be just one ounce of the good man that you were then I know the world will be far better, kinder place.”

2.26 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a special politician who gets a tribute covering the whole front page of the *Manchester Evening News* with the headline “An example of honesty, principle and kindness”, a quote taken from comments from the Mother of the House but echoed by so many in recent days. The tributes often mention what an outstanding public servant Tony was, and what a good, kind person he was. He was always ready with a kind word to me in difficult times; in particular, I remember his sympathy when my mum died.

To those of us who have been involved in Greater Manchester politics for a long time, Tony was a giant. His record of public service is unparalleled—as a councillor, MP, police and crime commissioner and Mayor, he was a hugely respected and influential figure. He will be missed across greater Manchester, but also across

[Jeff Smith]

Parliament. The respect he was held in on all sides of the House been clear today and in recent days. Perhaps what I admired most about Tony was that his contributions were always so thoughtful. They came from a place of principle, and he always had great conviction, but he was always measured and able to look at the big picture with great knowledge and experience. His wisdom will be missed across this House.

As a long-time resident of Chorlton in my constituency, he will be missed by the local community. As a familiar face on Beech Road, he was liked by everyone. Among many tributes, I was touched to see the following written by staff from Ludo's deli on Beech Road:

"We are all very sad at Ludo's. One of our loveliest customers, so supportive. I'm already missing him and all the lovely chats we had about everything and nothing. All our thoughts are with his family and friends"—

as are all our thoughts today.

Finally, he will be missed by his friends in the Bowling Green and the other pubs in Chorlton, where he liked to chat about politics or Manchester United over a pint, and especially by his colleagues in our local Labour party, who admired and respected him so much.

2.28 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is so sad that today we are paying tribute to our dear friend and colleague, and my constituency neighbour, Tony. I have listened to so many stories this afternoon, and it is a testament to the person Tony was that people from all sides of the House have spoken so strongly about him. I hope that provides some comfort to his family and his staff, who I know loved him so much.

One thing that sticks out is not only the enormous impact that Tony had on British politics, but the high regard in which he was held, which is quite unusual in this place. What has really stood out is that almost everyone has an individual story and mentions his kindness. I absolutely agree with that. My recollection is of the kindness he showed me when I was a new MP and he was chair of the parliamentary Labour party.

As police and crime commissioner, Tony organised a roundtable on tackling violence against women and girls. He invited me along because he knew that I was passionate about that. He showed such empathy to the women who were there because of their experiences. I also remember his help in a constituency case for a mum who had lost her son to murder. Again, the way he was with her was quite remarkable. Most recently, when we knew that Tony was poorly, I was really keen to organise a Parliamentarians for Peace event—thank you for that, Mr Speaker—and as soon as I sent the message around, he was the first to respond, saying, "Yes, we must do something. I'll be there." Unfortunately, he was not able to be there, but I knew that he absolutely wanted to be.

Tony was the embodiment of politics as public service: deeply humble, conscientious and compassionate. He worked tirelessly in the interests of his constituents, not for himself. As a constituency neighbour, I know the work that Tony put into his work in Rochdale. He called me just before Christmas, because there was a particular

issue that he said he needed my help on and wondered whether the wording of a letter was just right. The way he worked was so collaborative; it was quite special. Tony was not interested in politics as a game or a sport. He was passionate about changing lives and our politics being the vehicle to do just that. I will always think about his poignant words when speaking to a young constituent:

"For me politics is about all people, it's that sense of human solidarity that matters. If it's not about making people's lives better, don't be a politician."

I ask all colleagues, in Tony's memory, to redouble our efforts to make people's lives better. Rest in peace, Tony.

2.32 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I first met Sir Tony about 10 years ago. Like my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), I was young once. At the time, I was active in Young Labour and was fundraising for Hazel Grove constituency Labour party in Stockport. Tony did not know me, but his office was helpful and he made the time to come to Hazel Grove and fundraise for a CLP that at that time had no Labour councillors and a Liberal Democrat MP. Not only did he come to the fundraiser, but he spent the entire evening with us and spoke to each and every person. We had a table for Young Labour activists and he went over and spoke to each and every one of them. He inspired me and many people on that table. Many are now Labour councillors and Labour party activists. His demeanour was very soft: he spoke softly and chose his words wisely. Many colleagues on both sides of the House have said that we could all learn from the way he conducted himself.

It has also been mentioned that he was an internationalist. He believed in a better world for everyone, both in the UK and across the world. I remember inviting him to speak at an event at the Mechanics' Institute in Manchester in 2017 for the Cuba solidarity campaign, supported by Unison the trade union. He impressed us all with his Spanish skills: he delivered parts of his speech in fluent Spanish and he was also able to translate. I was in awe of him, because I had wanted to learn Spanish for a long time and had never quite managed to get there. He was giving a speech and, out of nowhere, kept moving between Spanish and English. It was quite impressive.

When I was in the Labour Whips Office, he was in my group and I had frequent interactions with him. He was always very kind with his time. Unfortunately, when he was not well recently he asked me to be his proxy vote in the parliamentary Labour party and, for a while, in the Chamber. I remember my last conversation with him. He was coming up those stairs into the Chamber and said to me, "We were supposed to have that pint." I said, "Tony, please let me know what works for you and I will take you to my favourite pub in Stockport to have a fine pint of cider." He said that he would.

One of my last messages to him on WhatsApp was on 29 December. I said, "Tony, I hope you are well. Please let me know if you have any availability and I would love to have that pint with you." He did not respond and I was a bit disappointed, but when I messaged him two days later, on 31 December, to wish him a very happy new year, he responded straightaway. Looking at my messages, his last message was to wish me a happy and successful 2024.

A lot of people have said—and I agree with them—that he will leave a massive hole in Greater Manchester politics, but I think it is bigger than that: he will leave a massive hole in British politics. It is uncommon for someone to be remembered fondly on both sides of the House, particularly a politician, so it is nice to see that there are colleagues from all the major parties here to speak about their memories of Sir Tony. On behalf of the people of Stockport, my thoughts and prayers are with his family, his friends and his staff members.

2.35 pm

Andrew Western (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Colleagues have already ably described Tony's internationalism, socialism and trade unionism, but as one of my predecessors as Member of Parliament for Stretford, I want to pay tribute today to his local work, his collegiate nature and the way he went about his business. His personal style was unique, but it was also incredibly impressive.

Tony was a true son of Stretford. Born and raised locally, he was extremely well-regarded and conscientious as a constituency MP from 1983 to 1987, even if being born locally made it inevitable that he was a fan of Manchester United—you can eventually learn to forgive that in a person. He was known locally not only as a man of absolute principle—the person that so many of us are familiar with here—but as a person who got things done for the community. Indeed, during my own election campaign that led to me coming to this place in 2022, Tony, who made frequent visits to the campaign trail, was often recognised by local residents and his time as an MP remembered favourably. What was all the more remarkable was the fact that he often recognised those residents too, some 25 years after he had ceased to be the MP for Stretford.

But that was Tony all over. He treated everybody he met with courtesy. He earned respect because he gave it without question. There have been many tributes to Tony in recent weeks, but the one that chimed with me most was from a former member of Tony's staff team who said that the thing she admired most was that he always treated working-class people with respect, and that that means everything, especially to people who have rarely been treated like that before. It may sound like a small thing, but it is less common than it should be, and what a mark of the man.

I guess in total I have known Tony for almost 20 years, but it was when I became the group leader on Trafford Council and Tony was the police and crime commissioner and then the interim Mayor of Greater Manchester that I first saw him in action. That was, as we have heard, an incredibly tough gig, but Tony went about it with his usual inclusiveness and he was truly exceptional; a famously international person who knew that, when all was said and done, for real working people all politics was local. He also understood that crime was a working-class issue, which is what had driven him to become the PCC in the first place. He cared about the people and communities he served, and that shone through. Whether in this Chamber, in his constituency, or indeed having a pint with him in the Beech in Chorlton with our mutual friend Councillor Thomas Robinson, that spirit of public service shone through.

Tony's approach to serving people was the same as his approach to supporting colleagues: human solidarity. That quiet word, that nod of encouragement, that message to keep going. The phone call he made to me in November because he had heard I was having some issues in the constituency, just to check that I was okay and to make sure that I felt supported. We heard similar from the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson). It was something he also extended to my own mother when she was facing a tough election campaign in 2016. I will always remember the phone call that he made to her at 4 am, having got the number from Judith, to congratulate her on her re-election.

Tony really was an outstanding man. When I look for the word that sums him up best, I find that it is "thoughtfulness." He was an exceptional parliamentarian, he was an outstanding community politician, but above all he was fundamentally a thoroughly decent man.

2.40 pm

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): We have heard much about the many roles that Tony played during his time in politics, in the House, in the Labour party, as a police and crime commissioner, and as the interim Mayor of Greater Manchester. He was also a champion of the underdog, someone we could all learn from and someone I absolutely looked up to. He was a great friend of mine from his time as the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I was a newbie in this place in 2019, and he helped me to navigate the corridors and the strange rules that govern this place.

The chair of the parliamentary Labour party, the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), talked about Tony's tolerance and restraint. I can tell you, Mr Speaker, that when he was the shadow Secretary of State, during a very difficult period in our politics, we put those qualities to the test many times, and in the numerous meetings that I attended with Tony and representatives of other political parties in Northern Ireland, there was not much tolerance and restraint on display, but he was there to calm us all down.

I think it important for me also to say that Tony's interest in Ireland did not start when he became shadow Secretary of State; it was a decades-long pursuit of truth, justice and peace for the people of our island. His friends in Ireland will never forget him, as he never forgot us. I was delighted to host him in Derry a few months ago for a few pints in a local hostelry, where we had great craic and told great stories, and to see him again in the Strangers Bar for a pint just before Christmas—sometimes we actually met without having pints.

One thing stood out to me on the many occasions on which I saw him after he got sick. We all knew that he was not well, but he wore it so lightly. As others have said, he did not talk about himself or his own illness; he talked about us and asked us questions about how things were going. I think of some of the contributions that he was making in this place at the end of his career. He was talking about arms exports to Israel, he was talking about Rwanda, and he was talking about and advocating on behalf of private tenants who were not being treated properly. He was an advocate for the voiceless until the very end.

[*Colum Eastwood*]

I want to extend our sympathy and love to Tony's family and friends, and to all who loved him. On behalf of the people I represent on our island, I say, "Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam". May he rest in peace.

Mr Speaker: I believe that Mike Kane has an announcement to make.

2.42 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I have a thousand stories to tell about Tony, having met him 40 years ago as member of the Fianna Phádraig pipe band in Stretford during an Armistice Day event, but I will save them for the Stranger's Bar later.

My sympathies first go to Judith, who continues her work as councillor for the Longford ward in Trafford.

Tony was an active member of the Catholic community here in Westminster. Father Alexander has asked me to convey to the House that the Catholic mass at 6 pm tomorrow in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft will be for the repose of the soul of Tony, and that all will be welcome.

2.43 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I met Tony when we became corridor neighbours after his 2017 election, but I knew of his reputation and was somewhat in awe of it. When I worked with him, my Irish-Mancunian Aunt Margaret messaged me to say, "You're working with our Tony!" She was so proud and told everyone in Middleton about my great rise.

Although 2018 was a difficult time in the Labour party, in our country and in Northern Ireland, Tony assumed the role of shadow Secretary of State with his usual calm, professionalism and guiding political principles. Knowing my interest in Northern Ireland, he brought me into the team. It is still a mystery to me that when I became a shadow Northern Ireland Minister there was no announcement, there were certainly no tweets, and I am not even sure that the Office of the Leader of the House knew that the number of people in that team had risen from two to three. Along with the aforementioned Steve Pound, I became part of a trio. What a time that was—again, perhaps there will be stories later.

Tony was not going to allow a bit of procedure, or indeed convention, get in the way of pragmatism and what he thought was needed at the time. He wanted to have a woman in his team—he was a great supporter of women's equality. It was such a great pleasure to work with him at that time. Wherever we went, whoever we met and whatever difficult discussions we had—and there were many—with all political parties it was exactly the same. We met the political parties, we met those victims of the terrible violence in Northern Ireland, for which people are still struggling to get justice, we met campaigners for a new and different Northern Ireland, we met the Irish Government, and we met Tory Ministers, with whom we had difficult but always respectful conversations. Tony was exactly the same at all those meetings: calm, informed, respectful and, ultimately, very wise.

Sadly, there are not always enough people in this place who are interested in the affairs of Northern Ireland, so we often had a lot of down time between

debates. We were often here quite late when everyone else had gone on to do other things. We also spent a lot of time travelling, and I learnt so much. I have not met most of Tony's family, but I feel that I know about them, and we shared the great love that we both felt for our families.

I remember waxing lyrical—as I am sometimes wont to do, but will not do now—when asking his advice about how best to be a good MP, and how best to use Parliament. Should MPs stay on the Back Benches, should they take a position on the Front Bench, should they join Select Committees, should they try to introduce private Members' Bills? He stopped, raised his hand, took a sip of his pint and asked me, "Can you do joined-up writing?" [*Laughter.*] And I can, Mr Speaker. When I said that I could, Tony said, "There is always a job to be done in this place by people who can do joined-up writing." What he meant was that MPs should have a clear focus on their constituents—there is a job to be done there, which he did really well—but after that they should do what they feel is right for them, where they think they can make the most difference. But he also meant, "Enjoy the great privilege that you have."

I will miss Tony for that sense of fun, for that mischievousness, and for his great wisdom and friendship, particularly over the last couple of years when he was ill. We all seem to have spoken to him and received texts in the last two months, so that phone bill must be very high. Tony had no intention of dying when he spoke to us in those last conversations, but I know from the work that he did with me on assisted dying and the right of people to choose their moment of leaving that that choice to be at home with the love of his family would have been a very important one. Our main thoughts are with his family and close friends. I thank everyone for sharing them, and may he rest in peace.

2.47 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Let me explain to our friends opposite that the reason so many of us loved and respected Tony was that, for us, he was one of the finest socialists and trade unionists that we had ever met. If he were here, however, I think he would be asking why we are not celebrating one of his greatest attributes.

Tony was possibly the best political plotter any of us have ever come across. He was always plotting for a cause, and it was usually the right cause. I remember the plot that made him the chair of the trade union group in Parliament. At that time the Labour leadership were perhaps not as amicable as they are now. It was said that they always looked on the trade unionists as the uninvited uncle at the wedding who turned up every now and again. What Tony became was the bridge between the trade union movement and the then Labour leadership, and that held together our relationship with the movement overall. Then there was the plot to make him chair of the PLP, to oust Ann Clwyd, as Members may recall. It was a Brownite plot—and a prominent Brownite, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), is sitting beside me—but it was also a good cause. Tony saw that the leader dominated the PLP, and that there needed to be a political balance that reflected all the different views.

A large number of people would not have voted against the Iraq war if it had not been for Tony. He led by example on every occasion, on a very principled basis. If he were here today talking about Palestine, he would be leading for the Palestinian people.

I was in the Shadow Cabinet with Tony. Some colleagues may remember that there was not an awful lot of fight for jobs in the Shadow Cabinet; fending off the monthly coup took a bit of our time. The reason he came in was his loyalty to the cause and his loyalty to the party. Whoever was leader, he was loyal and he did his job. We appointed him shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, because I do not know anyone else who could get that lot talking to one another in the same room in that way. That is why we loved and respected him—because he was part of us, he was part of our movement: a trade unionist, a socialist, a parliamentarian of the highest degree. He knew how this place worked and he was able to use that, just as he did for the party, for the best of causes and the best of objectives. That is why we will greatly miss him, exactly as the leader of the party has said. The foundations that we lay in the future will be based upon the principles that he advocated and convinced so many people of.

2.50 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I was a bit worried today because I thought I was going to be overwhelmed with emotion and also because I thought I might find out that I was not Tony's favourite MP. It was the mark of a good leader and a good man that he made people feel like they were his favourite and that he was telling them something special. I cannot tell you how long I have known Tony because I have been in the trade union movement for so many years and our paths crossed all the time; we were campaigning all the time on so many different issues. But I remember in 2005 when I came into Parliament, I was quite obviously distressed about something—I do not know what—and I remember Tony putting his hand on my shoulder quite gently and saying, "Dawn, you're often going to feel lost in this place, but don't worry." He said that if I ever had any questions I could always ask him, no matter how silly those questions were, and I have passed that on to new MPs that come in. I always say, "If you have a silly question, ask me. It's okay", because I remember how Tony made me feel when he said that.

Tony also told me not to believe people who said they knew how this place worked, because inevitably they do not. That I carry with me too. The last conversation I had with Tony was at the bottom of the stairs by the Opposition office and I remember he asked me how I was and how my health was. And I thought, "Oh my goodness, he is going through what he is going through." I remember sending him a message that me and the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees)—who cannot be here today but would really want to be—were feeling quite lost and we did not know what to do—*[Interruption.]* I do not know how to portray to the family—sorry; how to portray to the family how much he meant to us.

2.52 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It has been a real comfort to me to listen to so many tributes for such a wonderful man that I have the

highest respect for. I had the pleasure of knowing Tony for many years and it was a joy to work together in Parliament after decades of friendship. He was such a kind, caring, compassionate man. Tony could not help himself from helping others. Every day was a day of action to help others to make life and things better. Only last month, I was at the all-party parliamentary group on Belarus—he corrected me on how I pronounce that—which was chaired by Tony, and he was fighting as passionately as ever for a free and democratic Belarus. That was just last month. Tony was kind and softly spoken yet so strong in his beliefs, and actions always followed them up. He was a dear friend to so many people and so well respected, and I am privileged to be one of those people. I always enjoyed chatting over a drink of tea in the Tea Room, and we would have many a laugh. I will miss Tony, my real friend. God bless Tony and God bless his family—may you take the same comfort that I have here today listening to so many well-deserved tributes.

2.54 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I wanted to speak today to pass on my condolences to Tony's family, but also to mark somebody who is one of the most standout individuals I have come across in the 27 years that I have been in this House. I first got to know him soon after I was elected in 1997; we were members of the same trade union group. He was somebody who you looked forward to meeting socially around the place because he was always good company, and he was somebody who was always wise and worth listening to, whether it was here in the Chamber or in discussions elsewhere.

Perhaps I got to know Tony best when I joined the parliamentary Labour party committee when he was chair of the PLP. You will remember, Mr Speaker, as will those of us who were here at the time, what we went through with the expenses issues, where MPs came under a considerable amount of criticism. Tony's leadership really came to the fore there. His calmness and his ability to influence what was going on were really exemplary. I used to sit in the committee when the civil servant—I will not name him—who had been invited to set up the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority came in to talk down to us, I have to say. Tony was very calm, as always, and I was not. I always thought that in his negotiations, Tony went away and said, "If you don't negotiate with me, I'm going to set him on you." His personal skills really got us through that time; I remember that time very well.

I was also a member of the Justice for Colombia group, and I know that they will want to pass on their sympathies to Tony's family. He had enormous influence on the work of Justice for Colombia and in supporting the peace process in that country, which has eventually made enormous changes there. Tony was a driving force, both in the trade union movement and in this place, in supporting Justice for Colombia. He was the embodiment of the word "comradeship"—whether it was through his kindness and decency, his compassion, his courageousness, it all shone through. He was among the best of us, and we will miss him dearly.

2.56 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It has been so good to hear all these warm tributes to Tony. He was a man of such warmth, integrity and decency

[Margaret Greenwood]

and that has resonated through everything that everyone has been saying. I got to know Tony when we both served in the shadow Cabinet and he was shadowing the Northern Ireland Secretary. Two things really struck me. One was the time that he would take to listen to people, to consider the problem they were grappling with and to give wise words of guidance. The other was the degree to which he cared about people so passionately. He worked tirelessly for his constituents, but also very genuinely for the people of Northern Ireland. I think that that has rung true this afternoon. I would just like to express my condolences to all of his family.

2.57 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I think what makes politics interesting for the people out there are great characters, and there is no doubt at all in my mind that the great Tony Lloyd was a great character. Anytime you met Tony and you left his company, you walked away with a smile on your face because there was always some witticism that he had left you with to think about. He always made you feel better about yourself and politics. I remember Tony talking to me about his great love not just for Greater Manchester but for the city of Glasgow and of course his other beloved football team, Celtic football club, which he insisted was Glasgow's No. 1 football team. As a Partick Thistle supporter, I can only say that he was nearly correct in his summation. He was very proud of his Irish roots, as I and many others across this House are. His work with the Parliamentary Friends of Colombia has also been mentioned, and for so many of us he was a leader in raising that particular issue.

I think we always have to learn from each other, and one of my first conversations with Tony was about the vital importance of a constituency office keeping tabs on the full moon dates across the year. We all know why, don't we? We can never say it here in public, but we know why. Full moon dates are a vital part of a constituency office's work. I will always remember this great man and this great friend. I hope the WhatsApp messages between me and him are between us and no one else. I say to his family and to our Labour colleagues: our comradeship and our love are with you at this time as we remember the great Tony Lloyd.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I am ever mindful of those who have spoken so, on behalf of my Democratic Unionist party colleagues, I express our sincerest and deepest condolences to Tony's wife, Judith, and his four

beloved children and adored grandchildren, some of whom are in the House today.

As is well documented and rightly lauded by Members, Tony's rich service in this House began in 1983, some 41 years ago—two years before the start of my service as a councillor in 1985. I will briefly highlight the friendship that Tony gave to me and everyone in this House. He made friends very quickly, and it was particularly meaningful when we served together on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) spoke about how, across the political parties, he brought us all together to focus on the things on which we could agree, rather than on the differences we sometimes have with each other.

Tony and I were often together in Westminster Hall, where he often spoke in debates on human rights and freedom of religion and belief. We were on the same side of the Chamber, obviously, but we were also on the same page in speaking up for those things. He was a voice for the voiceless, and boy did he speak up well. He was one of those people.

Although Tony and I may not have shared the same political opinion on the way forward in Northern Ireland, we shared respect and love for the country. Tony was knowledgeable on the intricacies of Northern Ireland and, although we did not always agree, his opinion was fair, reasoned and respectful. We enjoyed many a conversation in the Chamber, with me sitting here and Tony sitting just behind me. He often leaned over, and he was always softly spoken and incredibly courteous. He was always personable and often had a story. He never gave advice unasked, but he helped everyone who asked—that was the sort of advice he often gave to me. I enjoyed that.

Tony was a man of personal faith. Mr Speaker, I know that you and the family are ever aware of the importance of faith. The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) spoke about that, too. I am reminded of 2 Timothy 4:7-8, which is a great scriptural text. He has fought the good fight, he has finished the race, he has kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for him a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award him on that day, and not only him but also to all who have loved his appearing.

That is the Tony we knew. He was well thought of and respected in this place, and his wisdom and wit will be sorely missed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the tributes. I think the House is always at its best on such occasions, and today was exceptional. I am sure Tony's family will be very proud of today's tributes and comments. He will be greatly missed but never forgotten.

Business of the House

3.2 pm

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

I add my thanks to all Members who have paid tribute to the wonderful Sir Tony, not just today but over the past week, including the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). I sincerely hope that the words that have been heard today, and over the past week, will give some comfort to Tony's family and friends at this difficult time.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a short statement altering the business of the House for Wednesday.

WEDNESDAY 24 JANUARY—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by all stages of a short Bill relating to Executive formation in Northern Ireland, followed by a general debate on the situation in the Red sea.

I will announce further business on Thursday, in the usual way.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It was a privilege to be in the Chamber for those fantastic and wonderful tributes to our dear friend, Tony Lloyd. I gave my tribute last week, and I will feel ever in his shadow as his successor as the Member for Manchester Central.

Labour share the Government's desire to see an Executive restored as soon as possible, and if extending the deadline for elections to be called is the best way to achieve that, which it seems to be, we will, of course, fully support that. However, can the Leader of the House provide any update on the talks with the Northern Ireland political parties to achieve restoration of the Executive? It has been some time since we had an update.

Can the Leader of the House say for how long the period for Executive formation will be extended? Indeed, can she say when the Bill will be published? Giving the House just one day's notice to pass an entire Bill in a day is far from ideal, especially when its detail is still unknown. Can she outline the Government's plans for timetabling the Bill in the Lords?

Finally, I welcome tomorrow's debate on the situation in the Red sea, albeit that the debate has been shortened. Can the Leader of the House tell us when the wider debate on other matters relating to defence and security will now take place?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady and the Opposition for their support in this matter. The Bill, which she will understand is a very short Bill, will be tabled today and published tomorrow. I recognise that is a short amount of time for the House, but it is a very

short Bill, and I think the House will be able to cope with that situation. She will understand that the timetable for this matter is very important.

I will make sure that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has heard what the hon. Lady said about an update, and she will know that the Government remain firmly of the belief that a sitting Northern Ireland Executive would be best placed to act quickly and effectively to resolve issues for the people they serve, and that is our aim. I am sure the debate will allow some of those issues to be aired, although it is a very narrow Bill.

Timetabling in the Lords is a matter for their lordships. I will make further announcements on future business in the usual way.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):

I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I too pay tribute to Tony Lloyd. It was really moving to listen to the contributions of his friends and colleagues, which reflected the warm and decent person he was.

I regret that we are having to deal with Executive formation in this place yet again, because it is always best for the democratically elected Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly to be in their place and governing in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. The longer this drags on, the more the people of Northern Ireland suffer, which is frankly unforgivable.

I regret, too, that we are seeing parliamentary business created on the hoof by this Government, particularly in such a serious and sensitive area, but here we are again. Many of us warned of exactly this problem arising. We are here because of a mess of the UK Government's making, but they refuse to acknowledge that the easiest way of resolving it would be closer alignment with the EU, which would make much of this go away. Instead, the Brexit bourach rumbles on—a bourach this Government caused and are unwilling to face up to and sort out. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) will have much more to say on this tomorrow.

I have one question. Will this Government ever acknowledge their role in creating this mess and reconsider their hard-line rejection of the sensible option of returning to the single market?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady tempts me to go into detail on the single market, the customs union and the price we would have to pay for that, but you will be pleased to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I will not.

The hon. Lady will know that we have twice extended the period for Executive formation through primary legislation and, despite the best efforts, restoration was not possible before the formation period expired on 18 January. She will know that bringing forward this legislation has been tied to talks and negotiations, which is why we have the current timetable.

Point of Order

3.8 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would appreciate your advice on what can be done in relation to the poor performance of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in responding to e-petitions. It has been agreed that the Government will provide a response to e-petitions that receive at least 10,000 signatures within no more than 21 days, but an e-petition calling on the Government to take the Clean Air (Human Rights) Bill through this House has been waiting for a response for more than 100 days and is now over 13 weeks late.

I wrote to the Environment Secretary on 28 November to highlight the delay in responding, and to ask for a response to this petition and an explanation for the delay, but I have not received a reply to that letter. This is not the first such letter I have had to write to the Environment Secretary about late responses to e-petitions. In the last year, the Petitions Committee has had to write to the Environment Secretary on nine occasions regarding significantly overdue Government responses. It is critical that petitioners, who are members of the public, get responses to their petitions in the agreed timeframes, and a failure to do so shows a lack of respect for the petitioning process.

Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise on how I can ensure that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs responds to e-petitions in a timely fashion?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. The Committee she chairs is entitled to receive a timely response to petitions and, just as importantly, so are members of the public who have signed them. I am sure that she was entirely correct to raise this matter and that Members will be concerned about it. She is lucky that the Leader of the House happens to be here. I sense that she might want

to say something in response, because I have no power to compel the Secretary of State to reply to the hon. Lady's correspondence. As I say, I am sure that we may see a response from the Leader of the House, so perhaps it would be most effective for me to allow her to make a brief comment.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt) I am very happy to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker. As the hon. Lady knows, we do a lot to ensure that Departments are adhering to their obligations to this place. That takes the form of training, and of calling in Ministers and permanent secretaries in certain cases, and of course Members of this House can raise any such issues at business questions. I hope that Members know that I always respond to those questions and always take their requests and comments seriously. I will ensure that the hon. Lady's point is followed up with the Department and that her office receives an explanation and, I hope, a swift answer.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for that. I am sure it is extremely helpful, but no doubt the hon. Lady will come back if problems persist, as I am sure that the Speaker would be concerned to hear about these delays.

BILL PRESENTED

CHILDREN NOT IN SCHOOL (NATIONAL REGISTER AND SUPPORT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Bridget Phillipson, supported by Catherine McKinnell, presented a Bill to provide for a national register of children who are not pupils at any school; to require local authorities to provide data about such children in their area for the purpose of maintaining that register; to make provision about the support that local authorities provide to such children; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Wednesday 7 February, and to be printed (Bill 149).

Offensive Weapons

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order 23)

3.12 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the weapons to which section 141 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 applies; and for connected purposes.

John Ogunjobi, Glendon Spence, Jude Gayle, Donnell Rhule, Dennis Anderson, Beatrice Cenus and Ronaldo Scott—those are the names of those who have lost their lives to knife crime in my constituency since I was elected in 2015, along with two other victims I am unable to name because their cases are before the courts. Each one was loved by their family and friends. Each one had hopes and dreams for the future. Each one left a family and a community utterly devastated by their loss. And for each of these lives that have been lost, there are many more people who have been injured with a knife, some suffering life-changing injuries, all suffering significant psychological trauma. This issue is not unique to my constituency or to London, as this is happening across the whole country—in Yorkshire, Staffordshire, Kent and many other places, young lives are being lost, with families and communities devastated.

I am grateful to all the colleagues who have expressed their support for this Bill; they come from many areas of the country and from different parties. There were many more than there is space for signatories to the Bill.

Knife crime has a devastating impact on local communities, as well as families. It takes away any sense of safety and security, makes young people afraid and traumatised and acts as a barrier to self-belief, aspiration and engagement in education and learning. In August last year, I attended an end-of-summer celebration at a local youth centre. I watched young people perform songs, raps and poems they had written and produced themselves. There was nothing but love and support in the room as we celebrated everything they had achieved together. A few days later, I met some of those same young people again nearby at a police line, watching as the body of a young man they knew was being removed from underneath a forensics tent, after he had been fatally stabbed. We all felt utterly bleak; it seemed that all of the good work of the whole summer had been completely undone in that moment.

I pay tribute to the many people in my constituency who work so hard to reduce serious violence, including the youth leaders who are so committed to supporting young people, keeping them from harm and helping them to follow their aspirations. I want to mention in particular Ecosystem Coldharbour in the Brixton part of my constituency, which is funded by the Mayor of London's violence reduction unit; Code 7; the Rathbone Society; and KETRA—the Kingswood Estate tenants and residents association. I pay tribute also to Circle of Life Ignite, a group of mothers who have each lost a child to knife crime who are working to install bleed-stop kits in public places, so that the equipment needed to stem the bleeding from a knife wound can be accessed by members of the public and a serious incident can be prevented from becoming a tragedy.

There is some excellent work happening in our communities to tackle serious violence, but it is being frustrated and undermined by the increasingly horrific

nature of the weapons that perpetrators of knife crime are able to access—so-called zombie knives or Rambo knives, machetes and ninja swords. I spoke last week with Malcolm Tunnickliff, the clinical director of major trauma at King's College Hospital in my constituency, to ask him about the injuries his team sees from these weapons. He told me:

“we call it knife crime, but the victims we see have essentially been attacked with weapons of war.”

He told me that the injuries are devastating; with a normal knife, a victim might end up with a 2 to 3 inch scar, but zombie knives and machetes are very heavy weapons, and they inflict deeper slashes, which are incredibly disfiguring. Because they are so heavy, they are capable of cutting through tendons and bones, including the skull, so victims who survive frequently have brain injuries. The edges of these knives are often serrated, so they inflict terrible damage on vital organs. A bleed-stop kit is unfortunately woefully inadequate against such horrific weapons. Often the victims simply do not stand a chance, such is the severity of their injuries. In the case of the two most recent murders in my constituency, both victims died quickly at the scene.

Zombie and Rambo knives, machetes and ninja swords are readily available online. A quick Google search reveals many different weapons that can be purchased on Amazon, Temu and other online marketplaces for under £30. In a recent survey, Which? found that it was able to purchase items on Temu that were age-restricted or illegal under current UK law without any age verification. Google has been found to be profiting from the advertising of lethal weapons, including 17-inch zombie knives, “military tactical” blades and “zombie killer sword apocalypse machetes”, despite claiming to ban them. When such weapons are sold illegally, the enforcement is almost non-existent.

Knife crime is rising in England and Wales, having gone up by 4.7% in 2022-23 on the 2021-22 figure. There is much that can be done in communities to prevent serious violence: high-quality youth work, effective policing focused on building the trust of local communities, good mental health support, and high-quality employment and training opportunities all have a role to play. However, even where this good work is taking place, it is being undermined by the availability of lethal weapons. There is straightforward action that we in this place can take to help keep our young people safe. We can introduce an effective ban, backed up by robust enforcement, of the weapons that are being used to inflict the greatest harm.

Since 2016, the Government have promised repeatedly to introduce such a ban, but they have failed to act. In response to my recent written questions on the topic, the Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire responded that the Government would legislate “when parliamentary time allows”, yet the House of Commons Library has calculated that there were 21 days last year when the House rose early due to insufficient business, seven of which fell after the Government made its most recent promise to implement a ban. There has been parliamentary time, but the Government have simply not prioritised the issue enough to be bothered to act.

The communities I represent, and communities across the country, cannot wait any longer. Young people are dying on our streets because, in the words of the clinical director of emergency medicine at my local hospital,

[Helen Hayes]

“weapons of war” are readily available to buy on the internet and have delivered to the doorstep. The ban the Government propose is insufficient. It is too narrow and it would leave the perpetrators of violence able to shift to a different weapon of choice, such as a sword.

My ban would extend to all zombie and Rambo knives, machetes and ninja swords, and it would cover the sale, marketing and possession of those weapons. There are very few legitimate reasons to have a hunting knife or a sword in London, or indeed in any area of the country. A licensing scheme with rigorous age verification could be introduced for any such legitimate purposes.

The issue is urgent. No family should have to endure the pain of losing a young person with their whole life ahead of them. I do not want to have to stand at a police line again, trying to find the words to say to parents who have had their whole world ripped out from underneath them, watching as a community is retraumatised once again. The issue is urgent—it is literally a matter of life or death—but it has not been treated as such by this Government.

I urge the Government to support my Bill, so that effective legislation can be introduced to remove these lethal weapons from our streets. If this Government will not act, the House can be assured that a Labour Government will.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Helen Hayes, Wendy Morton, Florence Eshalomi, Marsha De Cordova, Bell Ribeiro-Addy, Alex Norris, Dawn Butler, Abena Oppong-Asare, Catherine West, Mr Virendra Sharma, Fleur Anderson and Seema Malhotra present the Bill.

Helen Hayes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 February, and to be printed (Bill 148).

Opposition Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

Children Not in School: National Register and Support

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It is probably a good idea if I share some of my thinking about this afternoon. Obviously, we have two debates and normally there would have been more time for them. I imagine the opening speeches will last about 15 minutes each, but I will have to put a time limit in place if we are to have time for the speeches in the next debate. The time limit on speeches by Back-Bench Members will probably be about five minutes. I hope that is helpful, but if anybody feels that they cannot squeeze enough in during that time, please let me know.

3.23 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House condemns the Secretary of State for Education for her failure to tackle the crisis of persistent school absence; calls on the Government to immediately introduce legislation to amend the Education Act 1996 in order to establish a mandatory duty on local authorities in England to maintain a register of eligible children not in school, as set out in Part 3 of the Schools Bill [Lords] published in the 2022-23 Parliamentary session; and therefore makes provision as set out in this Order:

(1) On Wednesday 7 February 2024:

- (a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;
- (b) any proceedings governed by this order may be proceeded with until any hour, though opposed, and shall not be interrupted;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private);
- (d) at 3.00pm, the Speaker shall interrupt any business prior to the business governed by this order and, notwithstanding the practice of this House as regards to proceeding on a Bill without notice, call the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South or another Member on her behalf to move the order of the day that the Children Not in School (National Register and Support) Bill be now read a second time;
- (e) in respect of that Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.
- (f) any proceedings interrupted or superseded by this order may be resumed or (as the case may be) entered upon and proceeded with after the moment of interruption.

(2) The provisions of paragraphs (3) to (18) of this order shall apply to and in connection with the proceedings on the Children Not in School (National Register and Support) Bill in the present Session of Parliament.

Timetable for the Bill on Wednesday 7 February 2024

(3)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at the sitting on Wednesday 7 February 2024 in accordance with this Order.

- (b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 5.00pm.
- (c) Proceedings on any money resolution which may be moved by a Minister of the Crown in relation to the Bill shall be taken without debate immediately after Second Reading.
- (d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) at 7.00pm.

*Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put on
Wednesday 7 February 2024*

- (4) When the Bill has been read a second time:
 - (a) it shall, notwithstanding Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;
 - (b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.
- (5)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.
 - (b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.
- (6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (3), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—
 - (a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;
 - (b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;
 - (c) the Question on any amendment, new clause or new schedule selected by the Chairman or Speaker for separate decision;
 - (d) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a designated Member;
 - (e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded;

and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph (15) of this Order.
- (7) On a Motion made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

Consideration of Lords Amendments and Messages on a subsequent day

- (8) If any message on the Bill (other than a message that the House of Lords agrees with the Bill without amendment or agrees with any message from this House) is expected from the House of Lords on any future sitting day, the House shall not adjourn until that message has been received and any proceedings under paragraph (9) have been concluded.
- (9) On any day on which such a message is received, if a designated Member indicates to the Speaker an intention to proceed to consider that message—
 - (a) notwithstanding Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order), any Lords Amendments to the Bill or any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly;
 - (b) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a

- conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed;
- (c) the Speaker may not propose the question on the previous question, and may not put any question under Standing Order No. 36 (Closure of debate) or Standing Order No. 163 (Motion to sit in private) in the course of those proceedings.
- (10) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to a conclusion as if:
 - (a) any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member;
 - (b) after paragraph (4)(a) there is inserted—
“(aa) the question on any amendment or motion selected by the Speaker for separate decision;”.
- (11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings on consideration of a Lords Message to a conclusion as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Reasons Committee

- (12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order as if any reference to a Minister of the Crown were a reference to a designated Member.

Miscellaneous

- (13) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies.
- (14)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a designated Member, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.
 - (b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.
 - (c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.
 - (d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under subparagraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.
 - (e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.
- (15)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings on the Bill to which this Order applies except by a designated Member.
 - (b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.
- (16) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.
- (17) No private business may be considered at any sitting to which the provisions of this order apply.
- (18)(a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which proceedings to which this Order applies are to take place shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings to which this Order applies.
- (b) Standing Order 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply in respect of any such debate.
- (19) In this Order, “a designated Member” means—

- (a) the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South; and
- (b) any other Member acting on behalf of the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Today, we seek the permission of the House to make time in the weeks ahead to pass legislation to protect the interests of children who are not in school; to use a day of parliamentary time to put their concerns first and them at the heart of our work; and to make real for one day the promise that only a Labour Government can bring—the promise of a Britain where children come first—because it is a national scandal that every day and every week so many children are not in school.

Absence from school is not simply a problem in itself; it is a symptom of deeper problems and a cause of further problems. While the package of measures that should tackle those problems—and under a Labour Government will tackle those problems—must be detailed and comprehensive, a key part of it is knowing where children who are not in school are instead.

Before I go further, I should emphasise that some parents choose lawfully and properly to educate their children at home. Many of them do so very well, very effectively and to a very high standard. Those children are not the focus of our concern today. Their parents do not have anything to fear from a register of children not in school—the register of the sort that the Leader of the Opposition and I seek the permission of this House to consider in a Bill next month.

Until very recently, support for that register of children not in school was a cross-party endeavour. Politicians across this House agreed with it. It was an element of the Schools Bill, which the Government introduced in the other place in the summer of 2022. The register also received support from professionals in children services. However, the Schools Bill disappeared from Parliament, but I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) who has pressed this cause so hard among Members of her own party and brought her own Bill to this place.

The hon. Lady's Bill had wide support outside the House too. Many supportive comments were offered to the hon. Lady on the legislation that she proposed, but the words of Julie McCulloch, the director of policy for the Association of School and College Leaders, bears repetition. She said that

“the Government really should be making the parliamentary time available to ensure that this simple and necessary measure passes into law. Frankly, the public will find it astonishing that there is no such register already.”

It is for exactly that reason that we today seek parliamentary time to put it into law as soon as possible. Of course, the hon. Lady and voices outside this House are not alone in recognising the crucial importance of the register. There were many distinguished supporters of that Bill, including on the Government Benches. I have informed all of the following hon. Members that I intend to reference them in this debate as a courtesy to them. They included the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Dame Andrea Jenkyns), the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who all went on to serve as Education Ministers. There was also the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who is not merely a former Education Minister, but is

today Chair of the Education Committee, and the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), who is one of the Secretary of State's ample collection of predecessors.

Support for legislation on children not in school is, of course, not limited to supporters of that Bill, none of whom was a Minister at the time. The hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), then a Minister in the Department for Education, was clear almost two years ago that he and his colleagues

“intend to legislate to ensure we have a ‘children not in school’ register.”

In respect of parents home educating their children, he rightly observed:

“That is something no parent who is doing the right thing should be concerned about”.—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 605.]

The right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb) was admirably honest when still a Minister last summer. He said:

“We think a register of children not in school is important.”

We agree with him.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), who is now back as a Minister, spoke, when launching a consultation, of the Government needing a register of children not in school

“to prevent vulnerable young people from vanishing under the radar.”

I could not put it better myself. Does he still hold to those words? If so, when will the Government get on with it?

The Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, has repeatedly called for a national register. Of course, we know from her words in this place last month, that the current Secretary of State herself takes the view that

“it is my priority and I hope to legislate on it in the very short term.”—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 607.]

Sadly, she is not here today to lend her support to the motion. It is also sadly the case that she has been unable to convince her own Prime Minister, because he—as he never hesitates to make clear—is never very interested in the welfare of other people's children. This failure by the Government to address the most serious and urgent barrier to learning in our schools—that children are not there—exemplifies a broader failing and tells a wider story.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on exposing this scandal that is affecting children across our country. In my borough, the problem has gone up significantly since 2016-17. Does she agree that, given what happened during the pandemic and the failure of the Government to meet the requirement of additional funding, with a shortfall of £10 billion, young people are suffering? It is vital that there is mental health support along with the register to ensure that young people are supported in going back to school, because mental ill health is a significant barrier to their returning to school.

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend. She makes an important point about the wider pressures that children and young people are facing. I will come on to precisely that point a bit later, but it is why I was

so delighted that Sir Kevan Collins, the former Government catch-up commissioner, backed Labour's long-term plan to ensure that we do address those challenges coming out of the pandemic.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on raising this important issue. Analysis by Labour estimates that more than 1,300 pupils in Wirral will miss half their lessons by 2026. That is an absolutely staggering figure. The National Education Union has pointed out that the scale of the impact of poverty on persistent absence should not be underestimated. I am sure my hon. Friend would agree that this Government have failed massively on child poverty and that they should listen to Labour, cut the cost of school uniforms and provide free breakfast clubs in every primary school.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her support. Those are precisely the kinds of measures that a Labour Government would take right now to back families, cut child poverty and ensure that children are set up to succeed.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): One reason why children might drop out of the school system and, as my hon. Friend says, go under the radar is because they have had a parent sentenced to imprisonment. The charity Children Heard and Seen tells us that we know exactly how many Labradors are in this country but have no idea how many children are affected by parental imprisonment. We know it is a six-figure sum. Does my hon. Friend agree that we could use a register to try to get some data so that those children get the help they need, whether that is mental or physical support?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all her campaigning work on the important issue of supporting families and children where imprisonment is a factor in their lives, such as when a parent is spending time in prison or is in the criminal justice system. She raises the important issue—one that I will come to in the debate—of the need to get a better sense of all the information around a child so that we can better support all children and families.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Bridget Phillipson: I will give way one final time, then I must make some progress.

Ed Davey: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. It is important that she has brought this critical issue to the House. Many groups of young children, as we have heard, are not in school for many reasons. One group that is particularly close to my heart is young carers. I am sure that she will know from all the evidence and analysis that, on average, young carers miss 27 days of school a year. That shows the absolutely urgent need to have a national carers strategy with a focus on young carers. Does the hon. Lady agree and will she commit her party to push that forward in government?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that we absolutely must do more to support young carers, and I give the undertaking that a Labour Government would ensure

that young carers' voices, needs and rights and the support that should be made available to them are taken seriously.

Members on both sides of the House will be familiar with the view widely held by those on the Conservative Benches that whatever damage they might have done to our country, whether it be laughing in the face of voters waiting year after year for NHS treatment, as the Prime Minister did last week, the sewage that fills our rivers and seas, or the growing crisis their party has created in provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities—separate from all that—at least the education that children receive in our country is something the Conservative party has not yet damaged beyond repair. The trouble with that belief is that if it were ever true, today it is no longer.

At the end of last year, the OECD's programme for international student assessment 2022 results came out. Conservative Members have for many years taken a keen interest in the results, which I should say at the outset are based on such a small sample in England that they may not be altogether robust—a point to which I intend to return. Close observers will have noticed that, over a number of years, the intellectual effort by the Conservative party and its apologists has moved from explaining to concealing what the results show, and from regarding them as a spur to action to taking them as an excuse for complacency. We are in a debate on an education matter, so I hope that Members across the House and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will forgive me if I briefly adopt a didactic tone.

The PISA score for each country shows how well that country is doing at educating its children across reading, maths and science. The PISA rankings are about how well the children in that country are doing relative to children in other countries. Rather obviously, that ranking is affected by not merely how well children do in other countries, but how many other countries are involved. Going up or down the rankings need be no measure of changing outcomes for children in England, nor of any success for this Government. It is therefore the scores, not the rankings, that are the proper focus of Government attention.

It is not enough that our children are doing better than children elsewhere if they are doing worse than their older siblings, nor is it a comfort that their reading is better than that of children in another country if it is worse than their brothers and sisters. Education is not a contest between nations, but a shared endeavour in every country and across our world to give children the very best start—not some of our children, but all of them.

The PISA results showed that standards in England's schools are going backwards in science, in reading and in maths. They may not be going backwards as fast as they are elsewhere, but the pace of failure ought not to be a source of pride. Some 14 years into a Conservative Government, they focus carefully on the rankings, not the scores, and their proudest claim is that other children for whom they are not responsible are getting an even worse education overseas.

It beggars belief—and it is no good blaming the pandemic. The pandemic was worldwide, but not every country has gone backwards. That slow failure is not a story of poor teaching, of staff not pulling their weight or of leaders not rising to the challenges they face. It is

[Bridget Phillipson]

structural, reflecting choices made in Downing Street and the priorities of the Conservative party: tax breaks for private schools, not standards for state schools, and smaller bills for the super-rich, not better starts for children. The one area in which this Government excel is the creation and maintenance of fresh barriers to learning.

Schools may crumble—indeed, despite the Secretary of State’s well-publicised view of the quality of her own work, the BBC’s “Panorama” programme last night showed powerfully that schools do crumble—but nothing seems to stop Ministers putting fresh barriers in the way of our children getting the education they deserve. There are barriers because the children are neither at school nor in home education; barriers because children are not ready that day, or that year; barriers because children have not slept and cannot concentrate, do not succeed when they should and are not learning when they ought; barriers because children simply are not well; and barriers that speak to the wider failure, and the piling of expectations on schools alone that schools alone can never meet.

Child poverty’s effects do not end as the classroom door closes. The good night’s sleep, the space to do homework and the quiet undisturbed time at home are all missing from far too many of our children’s lives. As I mentioned earlier, the PISA results are based on such a small sample in England that they may not be altogether robust, and that points, indirectly, at the problems we face—the problems with which the next Labour Government will and must contend, because this Government have not, are not and will not. Teaching children who come to school does not help those who do not, supporting children we know about will not bring in the ones we do not, and the results for children who are there are not meaningful for the children who are not. That is true for PISA, true for GCSEs and true for A-levels.

Labour’s belief is simple: excellence is for everyone—not just for those who are in school every day, but for those who are not. High and rising standards must be in every school, in every classroom and for every child, but today, all too clearly, they are not. Across the autumn and spring terms last year, more than 1.5 million children were persistently absent from school. That is, roughly speaking, one in five children, or more than double the number who were absent during the same terms five years ago. If that rise goes on, the number of children persistently absent will rise to more than 2 million in 2025-26, or one in four children missing at least a day each fortnight. That is a disaster, and the Government are doing as close as they can to nothing at all.

Let me quote to the House the words of the headteacher of a state secondary school in the north-east, earlier this month:

“Today, an unremarkable Wednesday in the second week back after a two week holiday, 10% of our students are absent from school. 17% of Year 11 students, those in the most important examination year of their lives, are absent. We’ve become used to these statistics and sadly, these patterns of absence are now considered normal in schools. Indeed, our attendance is higher than national and local averages.”

Ministers will doubtless tell me they are proud of their attendance hubs, and the 10 councils in which they are set to deliver attendance mentoring. The Secretary of

State might as well be proud of the water pistol she brings to a wildfire. School leaders know it is a disaster. They can see the catastrophe unfolding around them.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is giving a truly excellent speech. She has talked about barriers; does she agree that one of the big barriers is the fact that children with a neurodivergent condition cannot get a diagnosis and, even if they do, they cannot get an education, health and care plan or a SEND plan? That is creating huge barriers for children with neurodiversity and autism to access school in a safe environment.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the challenges right across our SEND system—a system that the Secretary of State herself has described as “lose, lose, lose.”

School leaders know that this is a disaster, yet earlier this month the Department updated us all on the work of the workload reduction taskforce. It is not the work of teachers, the taskforce clarifies, to investigate a pupil’s absence. Teachers may do it—it is vital work that needs doing—but it also depends on our amazing support staff.

Labour’s plan to tackle the attendance crisis starts with our smallest children. It includes a childcare system modernised from the end of parental leave to the end of primary school, high-quality early education, a focus on life chances for children—not just on work choices for parents—and high and rising standards right from the start, with early language interventions to identify and remove barriers to learning, and a determination to reform the SEND system, to put money behind children, not lawyers, and to tackle issues before they hold children back, with a new focus on primary numeracy so that children love maths at six, never mind at 16—excellence for everyone; not for some of our children but for all of them. There will be free breakfast clubs in every primary school, because it is about the club, not just the breakfast. Every day, every child, every life and every start.

There will be 6,500 new qualified teachers and a new national voice for our support staff. Ofsted will be reformed and improved. We will end the high-stakes, low-information culture, with annual checks for attendance, safeguarding and off-rolling. There will be mental health counsellors in our secondary schools and new community hubs outside them, joining up the information that we have on our children so that every child can be supported between schools and services—every issue caught, shared and addressed. And we will fulfil the cause for which we asked for time today: a law to register and count the children who are out of school.

Labour is clear on how we will fund that package and the change that we need: by ending the tax breaks for private schools and the mega-rich. We will invest in what we most believe in: our children and their futures, excellence for everyone, high and rising standards, and a Britain where background is no barrier to opportunity. The legislation that we will introduce next month, with the House’s permission if today’s motion is agreed to, will be simple: it will be part 3 of the Government’s own Schools Bill from 2022, which provided for a register of children not in school. That is nothing that Conservative Members would not have been prepared to vote for had it been tabled by their own Ministers, so there can be no reason or excuse for Conservative Members who care

about this issue not to support the motion today and the Bill next month. They can choose their party or our children. I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): As I said, I will need to put on a time limit if the next debate is to have any kind of parity with this one. The limit will be five minutes, and I will ensure that it is put up on the board so that Members are aware of it.

3.42 pm

The Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds): I warmly welcome the Opposition's focus on the vital subject of school attendance. It is a big issue that we want everyone to talk about. Being in school matters for children—for their education, for their development, for being with their friends and for all else that school brings. As our campaign says "moments matter, attendance counts."

Everyone will be off school at some point through illness, and sadly some have to be off for extended—sometimes very extended—periods, but we absolutely want children to be in school as much as possible and to cut out avoidable absence. I am sure that the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) joins me in celebrating the success in cutting absence since 2010 and prior to the pandemic. Attendance levels improved significantly, with absence falling from 6% in 2010 to 4.8%, representing 15 million more days in school. Persistent absence, which was at 16% in 2010, came down by almost a third by 2015, and stayed around that level until the pandemic.

Many education systems are dealing with increases in absence since the pandemic. That is true of jurisdictions far beyond these shores. It is also true in all of England and Scotland, and in Labour-run Wales—where, by the way, the increase is from a considerably higher starting point to a considerably higher current point than in England. As such, I welcome the hon. Lady raising this subject. The actual motion, however, suggests that it is perhaps not a subject that the Opposition are taking properly seriously.

The motion starts by saying that the Government are not tackling persistent absence. Let us set aside for a moment that that is plainly nonsense, as I will come to shortly.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Not at the moment. There then follows the most colossal conflation—a massive non sequitur—about a register of children not in school because they are home educated. Obviously, absence and "not in school" sound pretty similar, but if the hon. Lady really thinks that the issue around absence is all about children being home educated en masse, she has failed to grasp the issue. [*Interruption.*] I simply point the hon. Lady who speaks for the Opposition to the motion as it is printed on the Order Paper, which clearly connects the two statements with nothing more than a semicolon between them. We do think that local authority registers are important: they would help improve oversight of those children who are not on school rolls, but they

would not directly address the larger group of children who are on a school roll but have been persistently absent from that school.

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: No; I ask the hon. Gentleman to forgive me for a moment.

Before we go on, I would like to say a short word about children in home education. This is often done very well by parents, who make huge sacrifices for their children, often in particularly difficult circumstances, and I pay tribute to those parents. Let us be clear: parents also have a right to home school their children, and that is a right I defend. However, we do think it is important for local authorities to have a register, because we know that not all children who are not enrolled at school are in receipt of a suitable education at home. We also think it is important that parents who are home schooling should be able to source support from their local authority.

The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South should know that that is Government policy because, as she said, it appeared in the Schools Bill. She may or may not have spotted that in the past few days the Department has completed a consultation on elective home education to inform new guidance. I know she has spotted that a private Member's Bill has been tabled in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), which will come before this House on 15 March. Both the Secretary of State and I look forward to working with my hon. Friend as she seeks to progress her Bill through this House. In the meantime, the Government continue to work with local authorities to improve their existing non-statutory registers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Damian Hinds: I give way to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), just because he has had a go three times.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for giving way. According to the 2021 census, there are over 197,000 young carers under the age of 18. That is recognised to be an underestimate, so when 85% of headteachers told the school census that they had no young carers in their school, that only illustrated how those carers are unrecognised within the system. Evidence submitted to the inquiry held by the all-party parliamentary group on young carers and young adult carers said that young carers have double the persistent absence rate of their peers—41.6%—but they are not recognised in the Department for Education's guidance on working together to improve school attendance. When this debate has finished, will the Minister go away and review that guidance, and would he consider requiring all schools to have a lead for young carers in the way that they do for SEN, to make sure they are no longer unrecognised within our system?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the number of young carers growing up in our country and going through our school system and the particular needs they have, issues that are directly relevant in the case of absence. We are working to improve understanding

[Damian Hinds]

of where there are young carers, including through the school census that the hon. Gentleman mentioned and also through the guidance that we issue. As he will know, “Keeping children safe in education” is the main guidance on that subject that is issued to schools: it requires designated safeguarding leads to be aware of the needs of young carers, but trying to understand those needs is something that goes broader within school communities. Of course, dedicated professionals working in our school system seek to do exactly that.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is so generous of the Minister to give way. In my constituency, families struggle. The cost of living crisis is ever present, and the housing crisis forces many families to move from house to house. Children end up quite a long way from school because parents, understandably, want their child to have some level of stability and keep them in the school where they know their friends and their teachers. To be honest, my schools are brilliant and the teachers are really committed, but surely we need recognition that cuts to council budgets, combined with the massive increases in need that there are at the moment, are a contributing factor to children being out of school. Does he accept that?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. Can I just say to Opposition Members, first, that interventions should not be speeches; and secondly, that they are taking up their own time, and they will lose time on the second debate?

Damian Hinds: Of course, I readily acknowledge that cost of living pressures and inflationary pressures have been difficult for families in many ways. It is also true that the single most important thing to underpin family budgets is employment, and we are benefiting from the still very high rates of employment in this country. We are also benefiting from the proportion of people in work on low pay having come down significantly as a result of the national living wage. Yes, there is much more to do, but there is also a great deal happening. I should now make some progress.

To go back to the children not on school registers, the Government continue to work with local authorities to improve non-statutory registers. I have already mentioned the consultation on revised guidance for elective home education. Through termly data collection, we are also increasing the accuracy of registers, improving the understanding of this cohort of children. However, true accuracy can only be gained with mandatory registers, stipulating the data to be recorded and an accompanying duty on parents to inform local authorities when they are home educating.

We often say that reading is the most fundamental thing in education, because if someone cannot read they cannot access the curriculum, and then nothing else in school really works. However, there is one thing that is even more fundamental than reading, and that is attendance, because whatever great things our schoolteachers do, they can only benefit the children who are there to benefit from them.

I am pleased that we have started to see some progress in this area. There were 380,000 fewer pupils persistently absent or not attending in 2022-23 than the previous

year. I am not quite sure how the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South does the extrapolation to her figure of one in four—[*Interruption.*] Well, that is not what the data series says. On Thursday, we will see the first data published for persistent absence in this academic year. We shall see what that says, but I hope it will show some further improvement. In any event, we certainly know that there is further to go.

Our comprehensive attendance strategy includes a number of different elements. There are clearer expectations of the whole system, including requiring schools to have an attendance policy and to appoint an attendance champion, and for local authorities and schools to agree individual plans for at-risk children. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) will be leading a debate in Westminster Hall very soon in connection with and in support of her presentation Bill on making such obligations statutory.

On data, which the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South spoke about, our attendance data tool now provides near real-time information, not once a year, to allow earlier intervention and avoid absence becoming entrenched. We already have 88% of schools taking part in our world-leading daily registers data pilot, and we want that to be 100% by September.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: I ask the hon. Member to forgive me, in the interests of time.

We have targeted support in which schools with strong attendance performance support others that need help, and we are expanding that so that almost 2,000 schools will benefit. Our mentoring pilot, which I think the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South inadvertently referred to, is delivering one-to-one support for persistently and severely absent children. That is currently taking place in Middlesbrough, Knowsley, Doncaster, Stoke and Salford, and it will be extended to 10 new areas, with a total of 10,000 children, later this year.

System leadership is incredibly important. That is why we have the attendance action alliance, which brings together leaders not only from the world of education, but from children’s social care, health and allied services. They are all working together to address the wider barriers to and enablers of attendance.

As I said earlier, we must be very clear that some children do need to be off school some of the time. That has always been the case, but there has been some change in attitude since covid, with a greater propensity to keep a child at home with minor illness, such as a cough or cold in some cases. We need to recalibrate at least back to where we were pre-covid. That is why we have launched the national campaign “Moments Matter, Attendance Accounts” to re-emphasise the importance of every day in school, not only for learning but for wellbeing, experiences and friendships.

Alongside this, we have made attendance a key theme of school and children’s services reforms. We have provided additional funding for recovery, including for tutoring and direct funding for schools. To help families, we have committed an additional sum of £200 million to scale-up the Supporting Families programme, which of course has a specific requirement on school attendance. We are also spending on the national school breakfast programme to provide around 350,000 breakfasts on a school day in

over 2,500 schools, targeted at the most disadvantaged areas. I also say to the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South that we should look at targeting secondary schools as well as primary schools, because persistent absence can of course be particularly concentrated in the secondary age group.

There are now considerably more children in receipt of free school meals than the last time a Labour Government were in office. This is despite the fact—*[Interruption.]* This is despite the fact, I say to the hon. Lady, that there are 600,000 fewer children living in workless households and that, thanks to the national living wage, the proportion of people in work but in low pay has halved.

Mental health barriers are also a very important part of this. That is why we are working with NHS England to increase the number of mental health support teams. They already cover 47% of pupils in secondary schools, and that will increase to at least 50% across all phases by March next year.

I am pleased to report that the latest data shows that, while there is still a lot to do, there is some cause for cautious optimism. Overall attendance last term was 93.2%, up from 92.5% in autumn 2022-23, meaning that pupils in England on average attend the equivalent of around a day and a half more across an academic year than they did the previous year. So while there is still a long way to go, this does represent progress.

To conclude, for the vast majority of children school of course continues to be the best place for their education, and it has never been more important to be at school. England's primary school children are now the best readers in the western world, and at secondary we have made considerable progress.

The hon. Lady said some interesting things about PISA, the main international study of attainment—not the only one, but the main one—in which England has moved up the rankings, having previously come down the rankings before 2010. The hon. Lady says that in the end it is the score, not the rankings, that matter, and she is of course right. I am surprised she does not know this, however: she said education has not been badly affected by covid in every country, but I have to tell her that covid has given a real knock to education across most of the world. *[Interruption.]* I beg the hon. Lady's pardon? *[Interruption.]* It has taken a great knock across much of the world and much of the world is now engaged in recovery programmes to make up that ground. But what the PISA results showed is that the knock sustained in this country was less than in very many other countries.

The PISA results also highlighted something else about education in England. It identifies this country as being in the relatively small set of what it calls “equitable systems.” In other words, as well as having strong performance relative to other countries, that performance is well spread out.

There have always been some children who are educated at home, and I repeat my earlier tribute to parents who, in so many cases, give up so much to do this and do it so well. However, covid created a big increase on top of what was already growth in the numbers, and it is important that we understand that.

The wider issue is that the legacy of the pandemic has also meant that school absence levels are too high. We remain committed to working with pupils, parents,

teachers, local authorities, the health service and other partners to tackle these issues through our support-first approach, building on the strengths of the current system and the success achieved by teachers and leaders in our schools prior to the pandemic. Being in school has never been more valuable for pupils, with standards continuing to rise. I am hugely grateful to all our brilliant teachers, heads, partners throughout the system and everyone who has worked to create the progress achieved so far, and I am confident there is a great deal more to come.

4 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This is not just an education crisis; it is a health crisis and a crisis of equality, too. The number of children who are not getting the education they are entitled to has, as we have heard, hugely increased in recent years for a variety of reasons. It is therefore no surprise that the figures that my party has produced show that over the autumn and spring terms, more than 1.5 million children were persistently absent from primary and secondary school, which is more than double the number of five years ago. A huge number of children are being let down, and their entire lives will be affected. It will impact on the opportunities they may have, never mind the education they are losing. If we are not careful, this crisis could see an entire generation written off, yet the figures continue to rise and the system seems unable to cope.

In my local authority area, Cheshire West, absence rates for pupils have roughly doubled in the past three years, leading to the crisis point we have reached today. There are a number of reasons for that huge increase, but undoubtedly a major factor from what I am seeing is how we are dealing with children with special educational needs. The number of pupils with an education, health and care plan in Cheshire West has risen by nearly 50% in three years, and that is before we talk about all those children who are yet to actually get an EHCP.

As I recount the stories of some of my constituents, the House will see how this issue is growing and how a depressingly familiar pattern is forming. A child is struggling at school, and there is often an undiagnosed medical issue. It could be that the pupil needs an EHCP or a referral to child and adolescent mental health services. Neither is easy to get, and all the while the situation at school is deteriorating. Eventually, the school says that it cannot deal with the child anymore, or the child cannot cope with school. Relationships broken down and education grinds to a halt. Far too often in those situations, the feeling that parents get is that they are on their own.

What I hear from these children's parents is that they just want to do what is best for their children, but they feel that they are on their own. They are often exhausted, always frustrated, and they feel they have to battle the whole time—the school, the NHS and the system—just to get the education their children have a right to. I will quote one parent, because she is worth listening to. She said:

“There needs to be more pastoral and mental health support within schools. This Government need to understand that a one size curriculum does not fit all. Children's mental health services are so overstretched and under-resourced that young people are on waiting lists for months on end and no support while they

[Justin Madders]

wait. All of the above have contributed to my girls having lots of absences. Lots of letters home with threats of further action not only cause distress to young people, but also the parents.”

I attended the National Autistic Society event on education this morning and a useful phrase was used: “collaboration, not confrontation”. That should be a useful guide for us moving forward. The same event revealed that a survey said that three quarters of parents of autistic children do not think their children’s school meets their needs. Shockingly, only 39% of teachers have received more than half a day’s autism training. Those figures tell us an awful lot about where we could put some things right.

Whether it is an autism assessment or support for a mental health condition, my constituents are often waiting a year or even more just to get that assessment. A year is such a long time in a young person’s life, and waits of that length or even longer do not help the children who are obviously suffering with a whole range of issues. They may have anxiety and depression to the extent that they are not able to attend school. They may be self-harming and they are having to wait to get that assessment because their cases are supposedly not serious enough. We have to wonder what kind of system thinks that a year out of a child’s life, when every day of their education counts, is not worthy of more priority.

Finally, I will say a little about the Children and Families Act 2014. If a child with special educational needs has a named school on their EHCP, that school must admit the child, regardless of whether places are available. That is the law, but that does not seem to be happening in practice. After the battle the parent has in trying to get the EHCP in the first place, which can go on for months, if not years, the battle is still sadly not over. We are now seeing a trend where parents are fighting at the consultation stage, with potential schools being identified but refusing to take the pupils.

We are getting more and more examples of children becoming education orphans because no school will take them. Their conditions are often too complex for a mainstream school, but all the specialist schools are full. We know of a 14-year-old who has been out of education for three months because all the specialist provision in the area is full. We are helping a six-year-old with an EHCP who is at a mainstream school that cannot support him. Consultations are ongoing with three other schools, but so far two of them have refused to take him. The question for him is: when will he get that education? The question for so many other parents around the country is: when will their children get the education that they deserve?

4.5 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Education is key to young people having access to skills and opportunities in the future, so we are right to be concerned about attendance. In spring last year, nearly 1.5 million children were persistently absent from school, which means that nearly one in five of our children were missing 10% or more of their school time: the equivalent of an afternoon or more every week. The sudden surge in persistent and severe absence risks a profound impact on educational attainment and longer-term outcomes. That is why before Christmas I tabled a Bill to tackle this issue, and I will be leading a debate in Westminster Hall shortly.

We should be proud of our nation’s young people. We should be proud that children in England now rank 11th in the world for maths and 13th for reading. Back in 2010, when today’s school leavers were just starting out in reception, the same league tables placed those same cohorts of children at 27th for maths and 25th for reading. There has been phenomenal progress; we must not let it slip.

The reasons for increased levels of pupil absence are often multiple and complex, including issues such as support for those with special educational needs and disabilities, anxiety and mental health. We know, for example, that if a child’s special educational needs are unmet, that can lead to them missing out on education. Changes in attitudes towards minor ailments may be another driving force behind school absences, and there may be other changing societal issues. It has been suggested to me that increasingly more addictive online gaming is impacting negatively on mental health and resulting in more children and young people missing school. I would like to see more research on that. For the most vulnerable pupils, regular attendance is an important protective factor. Absence from school can expose young people to other harms, such as being drawn into crime or serious violence.

In addressing school attendance, it is important that we do not simply lay the blame at the door of hard-working parents. Most parents want their children to do well, but many need help to support their children to fulfil that aspiration. Securing attendance requires an holistic approach, bringing together schools, families, the local authority and other local partners.

Much detailed work has already been undertaken on this issue. As the Minister said, in 2022, following a detailed consultation, the Department for Education published new guidance entitled, “Working together to improve school attendance.” It is over 60 pages long and extremely detailed, with a lot of emphasis put on early help and multidisciplinary support.

Last year, the Education Committee did a detailed inquiry on the issue of attendance. Witnesses agreed that the guidance needs to be put on a statutory footing, and that was a major recommendation from the inquiry. The Children’s Commissioner, the Centre for Social Justice and the Select Committee all support making it mandatory to follow best practice. Therefore, before Christmas, I tabled a private Member’s Bill that would make that happen.

The Bill would make the guidance statutory so that all schools, trusts, local authorities and other relevant local partners would need to follow it. It would introduce a new general duty on local authorities to use their functions to promote regular attendance and reduce absence, and require schools of all types to have and publicise a school attendance policy. The DFE has said that it will publish a revised version of the guidance ahead of the new provisions coming forward.

I note that the shadow Minister—who is not listening—has called for the introduction of a register of children who are out of school due to elective home education. I fully agree that improving the data and visibility of these children, so that councils can verify that they are receiving a suitable education in a safe environment, would be a good step forward. That is also supported by the Local Government Association. It is not part of

my Bill, but is part of a separate Bill tabled before Christmas by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), a former Ofsted inspector.

In order for the shadow Minister to get what she wants, all she needs to do is support the private Member's Bill. If she really wanted it so much, why did she not ask any of the Labour Members who topped the private Member's Bill ballot, coming in first, fourth and fifth place, to table it? It would have had its Second Reading last Friday and already be in Committee. My School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill is scheduled to have its Second Reading on 2 February. I hope it will get cross-party support from MPs, including the shadow Minister, so that it can move forward swiftly.

4.10 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): First, I extend my deepest sympathies to the family of Sir Tony Lloyd. I would also like to mention that, as Members will know, I am a proud Somerset councillor. Tory cuts to local authorities have had far-reaching consequences. In Somerset, that has been mixed with a toxic cocktail of the previous Tory administration's financial ineptitude. This perfect storm has vastly increased the burden on local authorities to deliver high-quality statutory frontline services, which residents should expect.

Particular pressure is on education. In the 2022 autumn term, Somerset state schools had a primary school absence rate of 5.3%, including 3.2% due to illness. At secondary level, there was a 10.2% absence rate, including 4.9% due to illness. The statistics do not reflect what the illness is—acute or chronic, covid-related or not. That reflects a wider problem. We are treating children with SEND as a homogenous identity. I fully support a “children not in school” register, which reflects that data, as the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) proposes.

One of my constituents is 13-year-old Otis. He has a diagnosis of autism and Tourette's syndrome. Otis first attended a mainstream school, but his parents told me that, despite the school's best efforts, it did not work out for him. Otis then moved to a special school, the Mendip School in Prestleigh, but that did not work either, despite the school doing everything that it could. Otis's parents said:

“Otis felt that he was placed with pupils with much more significant, and much more visible, needs. His education offer was gradually whittled until he did not go to the school site at all.”

If Otis takes up a rare special school place in September, he will have been out of school for two and a half years. The trend is clear. Pupils with SEND start school with absences and are either officially or effectively suspended or excluded.

Mind's 2021 report “Not Making the Grade” showed that 68% of interviewed pupils had at least one absence due to mental health. We need top-down direction from the Department to ensure that schools do not unfairly penalise pupils with SEND for low attendance. That includes children with possible mental health issues who have not received a diagnosis because of the NHS backlog that this Government have caused.

We simply cannot view all children with SEND as a conglomerate, in the same way that we would not group together numeracy and literacy statistics. Child A, who is non-verbal with autism, might be absent because she

needs to be in a sensory tent without disruption. Child B, with ME, might be absent because he is not physically able to get out of bed. Child C, in a wheelchair with muscular dystrophy, might be absent because the staff member who helps them with sanitary needs is off that day. Meanwhile, children D, E and F are almost invisible in the system, because they are on a two-year waiting list for a diagnosis, they are the sibling of a seriously ill child and going without sleep, or they might have told their teacher they just had the flu to avoid questions about their mental health. I know all six of those children, and I suspect many colleagues know children just like them.

We need the Government to recognise key differences in the SEND acronym; to set up a national SEND body; to have comprehensive training for all civil servants, Ministers and council and school staff; to have a mental health practitioner in every school; to ring-fence funding for local authorities to halve the cost of an EHCP for schools; and to reform the Mental Health Act. We need a children not in school register that is sensitive and informed. These policies will help to ensure children are not alienated from their peers or shut out of education. We Liberal Democrats have committed to all those things.

When we really understand the reasons why so many children are absent, we can deliver effective and tailored solutions to level up our stratified society, and give all our children a grade 9 education.

4.15 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): As the Minister stated, the motion conflates two very important but distinct issues. “Absent” and “not in school” sound similar, but if the shadow Minister the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) thinks that absence is all about children being home educated, which is what my private Member's Bill is about, she has failed to grasp the issue. Both are important and both need to be addressed, but the motion fails to do so. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) is introducing a Bill to address school attendance, particularly persistent absence, and I am putting forward a Bill to introduce a register of home-educated children who are not in school, which is much more long term. I would like to address why I am putting my Bill forward.

The only thing on which I agree with the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South is that currently no one—Government, local authorities or schools—can honestly answer the question, how many children are missing from school? Therefore, how can we know that every child is safe and suitably educated? Equally concerning is the number of children who have disappeared from the school roll altogether. While we do not have the data to fully understand where these children are, it is thought that many may have moved into home education.

I want to take this opportunity to make it absolutely clear that I fully believe that parents have the right to choose what education their children receive. That right should be enshrined in law. Parents are in the best place to make informed choices about what their child needs, with many parents providing a high-quality home education for their child. However, that is not the case for every child in home education, with a worrying number being

[Mrs Flick Drummond]

taken off roll for reasons other than their best interest, with the parents not having been able to make a fair and free choice.

Research by the Centre for Social Justice has uncovered a growing number of parents opting for home education because they feel that they have no other option due to their child's needs not being met in school. That could be the result of difficulties in accessing SEND provision—many autistic children are in this category—a lack of support for mental health, unresolved bullying issues or health concerns following the pandemic. Most troubling is the evidence that shows some parents have felt coerced into home education for reasons other than the child's best interest, through the scourge that is called off-rolling.

I would like to take a moment here to pay tribute to the many parents, including my niece, who are doing an admirable job of providing their children with a high-quality home education. However, that is simply not the reality for every child. With no comprehensive data collected, we do not know what proportion of children receive a suitable education. England is an international outlier in that respect. A number of organisations, including Ofsted, the Children's Commissioner and the Centre for Social Justice, have uncovered worrying reports of home-educated pupils being left without access to an appropriate quality of education—one of my constituents wrote to me and said that he had been in that category—and parents are left struggling to cope with the demands of home education. As the numbers of home-educated children increase, so should our drive to ensure that parents are able to exercise their right to choose how best to educate their child, and that every child is supported to achieve the best educational outcomes possible.

Implementing a children not in school register is the natural first step to achieving that. A register would not seek to disrupt a parental right to choose where and when they educate their child. Quite the contrary, as a register can be used to offer resources to families, who are often home educating at great personal cost, should they want such support. The register would allow us to find and support those children and families who have been left on the fringes of the education system, and who may be at risk of harm. It is time to bring these children who are out of sight and out of mind back into the light.

Education is key to the country's continued prosperity and must remain the focus of any Government. I would like to thank the Government for their interest in my Bill, and the Opposition, who appear to be interested as well, and I look forward to continuing my work with them as it proceeds through both Houses. I ask the Opposition to stop playing party politics with such an important issue, and I hope all sides of the House will back my Bill to introduce a children not in school register, which is so important for ensuring the welfare and education of every single child.

4.19 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is good to follow the hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), and I commend her efforts in producing a private Member's Bill on this important subject, but I am a bit confused: if we all agree that it is important,

why do the Government not just vote for our motion? My hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), the shadow Secretary of State, showed us very neatly exactly who is putting party politics above our kids this afternoon, and it is not Opposition Members. Even better, if the Government are so much in favour of this, why do they not produce legislation in their own time? It is they who dictate the timetable of this place pretty much all the time, so if they are so concerned about our children, it surely should not have been left to the Opposition to put forward this motion. My hon. Friend made that case very well.

Underlying this issue, as I think many would accept, is the fact that the partnership between parents and schools is more or less broken. The team that our kids need to support them—their parents, their wider families and their teachers—are all struggling and finding life very hard. I want to make three brief suggestions for how we can put that partnership right and how we can all do some very simple things to help our children to have a better chance at school, reflecting in particular on my own experience in the Wirral.

First, breakfast clubs are extremely important to giving children the best possible start to the day. They are also very good for parents, especially those who are under pressure to get a decent job so that they can afford the dreadful rises in the cost of living that we have seen recently. If a school has a breakfast club, it means that the parents of the children there can choose a job that starts at 9 am, which can make all the difference in the world to a family. It can encourage mums as well as dads to take a job, and having a second earner in a home is a very good way of tackling poverty. Labour's policy of putting breakfast clubs into every school is about ensuring not just that our children have an excellent start in every primary school, but that they have a great start to the day, and also about giving their parents that choice of jobs.

My second point is about mental health support inside and outside schools. A couple of Members have already mentioned this. I have witnessed for myself what is happening to our children in the Wirral, particularly when families are affected by disability or special educational needs, in which regard an excellent case was made earlier. The current SEND system is broken, and we do not know nearly enough to support children with those needs. Our problems in the Wirral are being exacerbated by a lack of educational psychologists, but ultimately the way to tackle the problem is to ensure that every child has access to good mental health support. Putting that base level of professionals in every school will help children to receive support earlier in their school journey, and will prevent the exacerbation of those mental health problems. Strengthening the mental health workforce in schools should be our first response to ensure that children's problems do not become worse, because we know that many mental health problems start in the early teenage years.

Finally, I think that one of the most important things we could do to help rebuild the relationships between families and schools, and ensure that everyone is really giving our kids the best start in life—apart from excellent English and maths teaching, of course—is to provide a broader curriculum. When I see schools in the Wirral with fantastic sports teams, and great, active schools

where children have the opportunity to perform on stage, perhaps to tell a story about who they are and what they care about through the performing arts, there is no doubt in my mind that those children are much happier at school. It helps to build the school community.

I am glad that the Minister seems to be agreeing with me from a sedentary position; my only regret is that the past 14 years have done very little to support that vision.

4.24 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am pleased to make a contribution to this debate. The subject of school absence and levels of school attendance is a particular challenge we are facing at the moment in Cornwall, where rates of school absence are significantly higher than the national average. We have seen around an 8.5% level of absence in recent years, when the national average is about 7.4%. Nationally, about 24% of pupils are persistently absent, but in Cornwall that figure is almost 35%. I think that there are particular reasons why we are seeing that in Cornwall. We have seen a large number of people move to Cornwall in recent times, certainly since the pandemic, and many of them are coming because of the lifestyle Cornwall has to offer and the choices available to them when they move to Cornwall.

I have a number of concerns about how the situation that we are facing is being handled. For many years I have been concerned at what I see as the state encroaching on the role of parents, and that seems to be happening more and more. I was concerned about this long before I came to this House, and it does not seem to be stopping. I believe firmly that the primary responsibility for the welfare and raising of children has to lie with parents, and although the state can support parents and help them in that role, it should not seek to take over that role.

I was pleased to hear the Minister confirm at the Dispatch Box that the Government's position is that they will always support the right of parents who wish to home educate their children to do so. That is absolutely the right position to take. Many parents choose to home educate their children for very positive reasons, and I have to say that some of the most mature, articulate, intelligent and well-rounded children I have ever met in my life have been home educated. However, many parents now regrettably find themselves having to home educate their children not because that is what they believe is right for their children but because they feel forced into that situation. They cannot find the right school environment and support for their children, who might have particular challenges such as autism or a mental health condition.

One particular factor that I think is driving this issue is the attendance targets. The overbearing, heavy-handed approach that many schools are taking to attendance targets is leaving no flexibility for children who are facing particular challenges, and parents are being threatened with fines for not bringing their children to school. I have even had one parent show me letters from their GP saying that their child was suffering with a mental health challenge and would therefore not be able to attend school regularly, but the school still fined the parent for that child not being in school regularly.

This whole drive to reach the attendance target seems to be the only thing that matters, with no flexibility and no allowance being made for the condition or circumstances

that a family or child find themselves in, and this is creating tension and breaking down the relationship between the school and the parents at the very time that those parents need support from the school. I ask the Minister whether we can look at that situation. I know that the Government's official position is that headteachers have discretion and flexibility, but I am afraid that that message has not got through to Ofsted, which I am told still regularly marks down schools that fail to reach the 95% attendance target even when the headteacher can demonstrate sensible reasons why certain children have not been able to attend school.

The Minister knows from his previous time in the Department that I have never agreed with fining parents when their children miss school. I believe it is a very un-Conservative thing to do. At least let us take away that threat of fining parents when there are legitimate reasons why their child has not been able to attend school. I could give him a long list. My office is now contacted almost every week by parents who are withdrawing their children from school because they want to avoid the fine when their children are not able to attend regularly, even with very good reason.

I have no more time, but will the Minister please look at this situation and how these targets are driving what I believe is counterproductive behaviour by schools? It is not the teachers' fault, as I think it is coming from policy and from Ofsted.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order.

4.30 pm

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): I think we all agree on the value of education and how it can enrich children's lives and give them the best possible start. I am proud that improvements and developments in education have been the legacy of every Labour Government to date. It therefore pains me that I am, yet again, rising to talk about an issue in which this Government have overseen almost a decade and a half of managed decline.

The numbers are terrifying. School absences trebled between 2016 and 2022. If trends continue, 200,000 children will miss half of their school time by 2026. School absences are a threat to the education that is so vital in setting up our children for life and giving them the best possible start, but it is not an isolated issue. Yes, school absences are a cause of increased barriers to opportunity, but they are also a symptom of wider issues.

In rural areas like my constituency, school absences are exacerbated by inadequate public transport and sparse special needs education. As other hon. Members have mentioned, there are a multitude of reasons why children are not in school. It is not just because they are home educated, but because they are affected by parental imprisonment, because they are young carers or because they have disabilities. We need a register that captures the barriers children face, otherwise we have no hope of breaking down those barriers.

I mentioned inadequate public transport. Skelmersdale in my constituency, as anyone who has heard me speak in this Chamber will know, has 40,000 people and no train station. It also has a woefully inadequate bus service, with my constituents reporting issues with reliability and frequency.

[Ashley Dalton]

We can remove the barriers that make getting to school more difficult for those in rural communities if we focus on what really matters to them. Similarly, children with special educational needs must be able to get the support they need. One of my constituents, whose child has not been in school for almost six months, told me that the school identified by the local authority told them that their child was “unsuitable” for the school. There are no unsuitable children, only underfunded, overstretched schools.

The Government recognised the omissions in their SEND strategy when, in March 2023, they published their SEND and alternative provision improvement plan. However, the plan did not address how rural SEND pupils may risk falling through the net or how failures in provision may be contributing to school absenteeism. Mainstream schools are generally expected to use their delegated funding to meet the needs of students with special educational needs who do not have an education, health and care plan. If a school is unable to meet those needs within its budget, or if a pupil cannot be swiftly assessed and provided with an EHCP, we risk them being absent from the education they need and deserve, through no fault of their own or their parents.

I have been contacted by numerous parents in my constituency who essentially keep their children from school because they are fearful that the school cannot meet their child’s needs and truly believe that it is more harmful for their child to be in school than not. Improving school attendance and reducing absenteeism requires an holistic assessment of the barriers that children face. It requires timely medical care, shorter waiting lists when our children get sick, improvements to public transport and better SEND services to ensure that children’s needs are being met. How many children are not regularly attending school and are, therefore, listed in school absence figures because SEND provision is stretched and mainstream schooling is not meeting their needs? People in rural communities like mine understand that some children are missing school not through their own fault or their own choice but because they simply cannot get there or, if they can, because the school does not meet their needs.

Labour’s plan to address the issue of absences is simple: roll out breakfast clubs, put mental health support into schools, and make sure that SEND provision is joined-up and adequate. Under Labour, children will have a change to the schools system; we will nurture an environment and provide schools they can access and thrive in.

4.35 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): By the time parents come to see me in the surgery about their children not attending school, it is clear that the system has already failed them. Parents come to see me in tears as they talk about their children being refusers and the difficulty they have trying to get them out of the door. Parents have told me how their children become aggressive towards the parent who is trying to take them or hysterical, and how some have threatened self-harm, all because—for whatever reason—they do not wish to attend school.

It can be because of overwhelming anxiety, with children feeling sick in the morning before they go into school, or because of mental ill health. Parents tell me that children are developing rashes related to anxiety because they do not want to go to school. It can be because of bullying, with the added element of cyber-bullying. Parents have told me about a young person being encouraged to take a photograph of themselves to send to their boyfriend at the time, only for it to go viral around the school. That young person then feels ashamed and humiliated, and is unable to go to school—in some cases, they do not even feel able to leave their house. As has been mentioned by Members from across the House, it can be because of an undiagnosed special need and the fact that the family have been waiting for two years for the EHCP that they see as their golden ticket to finally getting the help that their child needs.

What happens when these children are refusing to go and the parents—good parents—are trying, but are unable, to make them? The local authority has limited powers to intervene. As the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) mentioned, the school’s answer is sometimes to threaten to fine the parent, who is trying to do the best by their child. The local authority cannot insist on managed moves; it can only try to encourage schools to support them, but it does not have the power to do this. Up and down the country there is a lack of specialist places, and local authorities are unable to open their own special schools; they have to do this through the free school system, so they cannot manage adequately the demand in their area. As many people who work in local authorities tell us, their spending on their high needs block is way beyond the budget they have been given.

What would any of us do if our child was refusing to go to school, becoming hysterical, threatening self-harm and clearly suffering with anxiety, if the school was threatening to fine us and if there was nowhere else for the child to go? I can clearly see why parents say, “This is enough. I’m withdrawing my child from the system.” I have spoken to many parents who have made that decision. What happens next varies, depending on the child and the parents involved. In some cases, it is the best thing that happens to the child, as they regain their self-confidence and self-esteem, and start to mix again. Often, there is a happy ending and they go to the 14-to-16 college, which is a completely different environment from the school, and go on to thrive. Clearly, however, that is not the case for all children. Some drop out of education never to return, and never get the qualifications they need. Unfortunately, some children are then incredibly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

So what is the answer? Of course, the answer must always start with the early years and with communication skills. One of the first things I did on becoming a Member of Parliament was to set up the all-party parliamentary group on oracy. Equipping young people with the ability to communicate and express how they feel is crucial, especially for young children who are so upset and frustrated that they do not want to go to school. Giving them the right tools to express themselves can open things up.

The Labour party is also promising health visitors who support children before they go to school. We also need to focus on early years education to support

children and prepare them for when they go to school, so that they know what to expect. Crucially—I am so proud that our party is supporting this—we need mental health professionals in every school. Teachers are not mental health professionals. When I was a teacher, I was not a mental health professional. These professionals are needed in school to support children; we cannot put that on the teachers. As has been mentioned, we need a curriculum review, so that we have a curriculum that equips children now and in the future—and, dare I say it, that makes school fun and makes the children want to go.

Finally, breakfast clubs will help and encourage children to attend school. I visited Christopher Pickering Primary School in my constituency last week and heard about the breakfast club it offers for a limited number of pupils. Kids were telling me it was great. They do “Just Dance”—luckily, I was unable to join in—and dodgeball. They play with their friends and they start the day happy. With a Labour Government, that opportunity would be offered to every single child, and that cannot come soon enough.

4.40 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Across the House, I am sure we can all agree that providing our children with a high-quality education is one of the most important things we can do—an education that inspires them to learn, helps them to discover their interests and passions, and sets them up for life. But if children are not in school every day, they cannot access the opportunities they need.

School should not be seen as an optional activity, to be dipped in and out of. However, research by the Centre for Social Justice found that more than one in four parents thought that school is not essential every day—not just one in four adults, but one in four parents. That signifies a real breakdown in the relationship between schools, families and Government, because what example are we setting as a country if such a high proportion of parents are not prioritising getting their children to school every day?

Every child matters and, to those children, every day at school matters, but for years the problem of persistent absence has got worse on this Government’s watch. Last year, 21.2% of children were persistently absent from school—over one in five—which is double the rate from just six years ago. In my local authority of Newcastle upon Tyne, the number of children missing half their lessons rocketed by 282% between 2016 and 2022.

The Secretary of State said that keeping children in school was her “number one priority”, but absence rates have been rocketing for years and we have seen so little action. It only became a priority because the Labour party have consistently spoken about this issue and now, because of the Tories’ inaction, the situation is spiralling out of control, yet they still do not have a long-term plan.

The problem does not exist in isolation. Our children are facing a mental health crisis, record numbers are living in poverty and they are being taught in schools that one teacher recently described to me as “joyless”. What is at stake here is a lost generation missing from Britain’s schools, yet where is the Government’s plan to deal with it?

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) spoke powerfully about the impact on families in his area, particularly families with children with special educational needs. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) made a powerful case for why the Government should back Labour’s motion today. My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) rightly identified that we need to break down the barriers to opportunity, which means breaking down the barriers to school attendance, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). Unlike the Tories, Labour will work in government to break down those barriers to opportunity. We will get our children back into the classroom and we have outlined a plan to address the problem if we are in government.

We recognise that not every child learns in school. We support every parent to make the choice about whether they send their child to school or home educate them, but to ensure no child falls through the gap, we need a proper record of where our children are being educated. That should not be controversial. The Conservatives even proposed a register of children not in school, before shelving it when education was no longer a priority for them.

The hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) has campaigned on this issue and the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) spoke powerfully about her campaign on school attendance, but it is shameful that these matters about which Conservative Back Benchers are lobbying their own Government will have to wait for a Labour Government to fix them. We would get on with the job and introduce a register, allowing councils to request information on home education and the ability to visit premises. It is part of our plan to deliver high and rising standards for the next generation.

Mrs Drummond: The hon. Lady makes some great points. The problem with the motion is that it talks about persistent school absences. Persistent school absences relate to children who are already on the school roll, and schools are able to track them. A register of children not in school is purely for home-educated children, and not for those on a school register, which is for children who are persistently absent.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Lady for her clarification, but we are not unclear about this. We do not disagree on the need both to tackle persistent absence and to have a register that identifies where children are being educated. That is something that the Government have pledged to do. The hon. Lady should continue to put pressure on the Government who have the power to do something about it right now, or Labour will do it in government.

We will also roll out free breakfast clubs in every primary school. Evidence shows that they improve children’s learning and development, and they have a positive impact on attendance and behaviour. We will fully fund those clubs by ending the non-dom tax breaks for the mega-rich. It is as much about the club as it is about the breakfast, providing children with a softer start to the school day, and with opportunities to play and socialise with their friends, setting them up well to learn throughout the day. When the Minister sums up, perhaps

[Catherine McKinnell]

he can support Labour's call for free breakfast clubs in every primary school, rather than the fraction that the Government's programme currently reaches.

Labour is also committed to addressing the mental health crisis that our children are facing. It is a key barrier to learning, yet children remain on long CAMHS waiting lists, unable to access the support they need. We would recruit thousands of new staff to bring down those waiting lists and put specialist mental health professionals in schools and community hubs, so that children can get the help they need, solving problems before they get worse. We would tackle this issue head-on, not let it spiral further out of control.

We also need to see accountability in our system. Labour's plan will involve annual school checks, which cover persistent absence, off-rolling and child safeguarding, so that problems are picked up early on, not left until the next inspection. In Wales, for example, Estyn has strengthened its reporting requirements on attendance, and all schools are now required to make available their attendance policies. We would reset the relationship that has weakened confidence in our inspection system by reforming the one-word headline grade with a report card, identifying areas where schools need to improve and delivering the support to do so through new, regional improvement teams.

Edward Timpson (Eddisbury) (Con): Does the hon. Lady support making schools responsible for the children they exclude?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman will know that that is part of his Government's school accountability system. Obviously, we will undertake a full review of our approach to Ofsted. We will also include and address many issues on which this Government are currently failing.

If schools are to offer high-quality education, we must ensure that our children are learning a curriculum that best sets them up for life. The pandemic shone a light on how children's early speech and language development was affected, and we know that stronger early communication skills boost outcomes and provide better engagement with schools. We would prioritise equipping primary schools with funding to deliver early, evidence-based language interventions. When it comes to the curriculum more broadly, we know that it needs reform. It is far too narrow and it is putting children off learning.

The life satisfaction scores of UK students have fallen through the floor in recent years. The UK now has the second lowest average life satisfaction of 15-year-olds in the OECD. We see that the opportunities for music, art, sport and drama are often squeezed. Opportunities for discussion and debate are few and far between. Our curriculum and assessment review would look at delivering a broad curriculum that prepares children for the future, reflecting the issues and diversity in our society. Assessments would capture the full strength of every child, giving them an excellent foundation in reading, writing and maths without sacrificing the things that make school fun.

To conclude, the difference Labour will bring is clear. Under the Tories, we have had 14 years of decline—of school standards slipping, teachers leaving in droves

and education not even getting a seat at the table—whereas Labour will do what we did in 1997: bring education back to the centre of national life, with a focus on putting children first and ensuring that excellence is for everyone. I commend the motion to the House.

4.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (David Johnston): This Government are committed to giving every child in this country a first-class education and every opportunity to make the most of their abilities. Although there is a small number of children who, for good reasons, need to be educated elsewhere, we want all children to be at school every day. That is key for their life chances. For children who are home educated—a right that parents have, and we do not question that most do a very good job—it is vital that we know that the education they are provided with is suitable and that the children are safe.

As my right hon. Friend the Schools Minister said, the motion conflates two separate things: the issue of persistent absence, which is when pupils miss 10% or more of their lessons, and the topic of home education for those who are not in school.¹ To take persistent absence first, the year the Government came to power, persistent absence was at 16.3%. We got that down to 10.5% in 2015-16, and it averaged 10.9% in the five years prior to the pandemic. It was during the pandemic that it rose significantly again to 22.5%.

The Government are taking wide-ranging action to tackle the matter. We have already established 14 attendance hubs across 800 schools, reaching 400,000 pupils. This term, we are more than doubling the number of hubs so that nearly 2,000 schools will be supported. We are rolling out an attendance mentor pilot that we had in five areas to a further 10 areas, and that programme will reach around 10,000 children. We have deployed 10 expert attendance advisers to support local authorities and school trusts. We have developed a data tool that helps schools to understand the local trends and target their support, and we have strengthened our guidance to local authorities. For the first time, schools are expected to have a member of the senior leadership team responsible for attendance.

Evidence suggests that the strategy is working. There were 380,000 fewer persistently absent pupils in the past academic year, and in the last academic term overall absence was down to 6.8%, from 7.5% in the autumn term the year before.² That is all backed by a national communications campaign to remind parents that "moments matter, attendance counts". The campaign aims to encourage parents to realise that their child should attend school if they have a mild cough or cold and no fever or vomiting, and that mild anxiety can be made worse by a prolonged period of absence. The campaign has been running across social media and the radio. We are grateful to Sir Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, for his letter reassuring school leaders that children should generally attend school if they have mild respiratory illnesses, because it is good for their wellbeing and a host of other things.

Of course, mental health challenges underpin some of the absence—something raised by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), among others. That is why we have been rolling out

1.[Official Report, 31 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 11MC.]

2.[Official Report, 31 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 12MC.]

mental health support teams, which now cover 44% of pupils in schools and colleges and will cover 50% of those pupils by March 2025.¹ We are offering all state schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead, and we are pleased that 14,400 schools and colleges have already taken that up, covering seven schools in 10 for all state secondary schools.

There is then the related but separate issue of a register for those who are home educated. I should declare that I served on the Education Committee when my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) chaired it, and we produced a report that recommended a register for those not in school. That remains a recommendation of the Education Committee. That is the register that was in the Schools Bill referred to in the motion and for which we remain committed to legislating. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) has been doing great work to champion this issue, and I look forward to the outcome of the Second Reading of her Children Not in School (Registers, Support and Orders) Bill on 15 March.

Various points were raised in this debate and I will try and cover as many as possible. The hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) and for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) raised issues about the SEND system. Our SEND and AP improvement plan is designed to address the issues that they raised about children being placed in suitable provision and in a timely manner. We should not have children out of school for prolonged periods because they are unable to get their needs met.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who I think is currently at her Westminster Hall debate, has introduced an important Bill, the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill, and I look forward to seeing its progress through the House. The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) raised the topic of breakfast clubs, which we are funding in 2,700 schools. Many schools already had a breakfast club, of course, and have had for some time, but we are funding 2,700.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) raised the issue of fixed penalty notices. Our guidance is clear that there should be a “support first” approach, but penalties are there to prevent court action from taking place. I should say that 89% of the fixed penalty notices issued are for unauthorised term-time holidays, but I am happy to pick up that discussion with him.

My final point is this: I have watched the Labour party try to reinvent itself as the champion of children being in school, and many Labour Members have raised issues about the pandemic, which is where many of the problems stem from. However, I remember their actions during that pandemic. I remember how long it took them to say that schools were safe. I remember the then Prime Minister standing here every week asking the Leader of the Opposition to say that schools were safe, and him not doing so.

I remember that when one of Labour’s union allies produced a statement saying that teachers should not be teaching a full timetable nor routinely marking work during that period, Labour said nothing to challenge it. When that same union teamed up with other unions to produce a 200-point list of things they wanted to see before schools returned, the Labour party said nothing

to challenge them. What was Labour’s big idea during the pandemic? To go against the vaccination advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which was that we should vaccinate by age, and instead vaccinate teachers—no other profession, just teachers—whatever their age. Why? Because the unions wanted that to happen.

In addition to the motion conflating two separate things, and in addition to this problem being worse in Labour-run Wales, like all problems are, we will not allow the Labour party to reinvent the history of their behaviour under this Leader of the Opposition. They cannot blame the last Leader of the Opposition for that; it was under this Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). It was this Government who did all they could to get children back to school during the pandemic, and it is this Government who are doing all they can to get children back to school now.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 189, Noes 303.

Division No. 63]

[4.58 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Doughty, Stephen
Abrahams, Debbie	Dowd, Peter
Ali, Rushanara	Duffield, Rosie
Ali, Tahir	Dyke, Sarah
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Eagle, rh Maria
Amesbury, Mike	Eastwood, Colum
Anderson, Fleur	Edwards, Jonathan
Barker, Paula	Edwards, Sarah
Beckett, rh Dame Margaret	Efford, Clive
Begum, Apsana	Elliott, Julie
Benn, rh Hilary	Elmore, Chris
Betts, Mr Clive	Eshalomi, Florence
Blake, Olivia	Evans, Chris
Blomfield, Paul	Farron, Tim
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Farry, Stephen
Brennan, Kevin	Fletcher, Colleen
Brown, Ms Lyn	Fovargue, Yvonne
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Foy, Mary Kelly
Burgon, Richard	Furniss, Gill
Butler, Dawn	Gardiner, Barry
Byrne, Ian	Gill, Preet Kaur
Byrne, rh Liam	Glendon, Mary
Cadbury, Ruth	Green, Sarah
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Greenwood, Lilian
Carden, Dan	Greenwood, Margaret
Chamberlain, Wendy	Griffith, Dame Nia
Champion, Sarah	Gwynne, Andrew
Cooper, Daisy	Haigh, Louise
Cooper, rh Yvette	Hamilton, Fabian
Creasy, Stella	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Cryer, John	Hanna, Claire
Cummins, Judith	Hardy, Emma
Cunningham, Alex	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Daby, Janet	Harris, Carolyn
Dalton, Ashley	Hayes, Helen
Davey, rh Ed	Healey, rh John
David, Wayne	Hillier, Dame Meg
Davies-Jones, Alex	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
De Cordova, Marsha	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Debbonaire, Thangam	Hollern, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Hopkins, Rachel
Dixon, Samantha	Howarth, rh Sir George
Dodds, Anneliese	Huq, Dr Rupa
	Hussain, Imran
	Jardine, Christine

1.[Official Report, 31 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 12MC.]

Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy (*Proxy vote*
cast by Ian Lavery)
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Miliband, rh Edward
Mishra, Navendu
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate

Owatemi, Taiwo (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Owen, Sarah
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Shanks, Michael
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Stringer, Graham
Sultana, Zarah
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Whittome, Nadia
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Christian Wakeford

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Bacon, Mr Richard (*Proxy*
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones)
Badenoch, rh Kemi

Bailey, Shaun
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Barclay, rh Steve
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Benton, Scott
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Sir Jake
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben

Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brady, rh Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, rh Alex
Chishty, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Sir Simon
Clarke, Theo
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Coutinho, rh Claire
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, rh David T. C.
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davison, Dehenna
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James (*Proxy*
vote cast by Mr Mark
Francois)
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Ellis, rh Sir Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Evennett, rh Sir David
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Farris, Laura
Fell, Simon

Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Ford, rh Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Sir Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, rh John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Marcus Jones)
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hart, rh Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, rh James
Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
Howell, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Marcus Jones)
Hunt, Tom
Javid, rh Sir Sajid
Jayawardena, rh Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Fay
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, rh Gillian

Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Kruger, Danny
Lamont, John
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Levy, Ian
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Brandon
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris
Logan, Mark
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig (*Proxy vote
cast by John Redwood*)
Mackrory, Cheryl
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Paul
McPartland, rh Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, rh Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria

Milling, rh Dame Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Damien
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, James
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mumby-Croft, Holly
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, rh Sir Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Randall, Tom
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Sir Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee

Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Scully, Paul
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, rh Sir Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, Royston
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stevenson, John
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, rh Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin

Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, rh Laura
Tuckwell, Steve
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir Charles
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Wallis, Dr Jamie
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, rh Craig (*Proxy
vote cast by Mr Marcus
Jones*)
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, rh Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob
Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mark Jenkinson and
Joy Morrissey

Question accordingly negated.

Protecting Steel in the UK

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Let me say at the very start of the debate that a lot of hon. Members on both sides of the House wish to take part, so once we have heard from the Front Benchers there will almost certainly have to be a three-minute time limit, if we are to get everybody in.

5.13 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the need to decarbonise steel production; appreciates the pride that local communities have in their historic steelworks; regrets that the Government has pushed through plans for decarbonising steel in the UK which will result in thousands of steelworkers losing their jobs and risk leaving the UK as the first developed country in the world without the capacity to produce primary steel; further regrets that the Government has failed to produce an industrial strategy which could have included a plan for the whole steel sector; believes that primary steel is a sovereign capability and is therefore concerned about the impact that the Government's plans could have on national security; also believes that steel production can have a bright future in the UK; therefore calls on the Government to work with industry and workers to achieve a transition that secures jobs and primary steelmaking for decades to come; and further calls on the Secretary of State for Business and Trade to report to Parliament by 27 February 2024 with an assessment of the impact on the UK of the loss of primary steel production capabilities.

Labour has secured this debate today because this is a hugely important issue. It is important not just because the future of the Port Talbot steelworks is integral to communities across south Wales—I know that many hon. Friends will be making that case passionately—but because it speaks to a much bigger challenge that we face as a country: how to decarbonise heavy industry in a way that is effective for our climate objectives and fair for our communities.

The Opposition believe that the Government's push to decarbonise the steelworks at both Port Talbot and Scunthorpe, in a way that guarantees large job losses and has no support from the workforce or unions, risks irrevocably damaging working people's trust in the opportunities the net zero transition could bring. We believe that it is a calamitous mistake for the UK to become, under the Conservatives, the first major economy in the world without the ability to make our own primary steel.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Decades of underinvestment and managed decline have devastated our steel industry, as the news from Port Talbot painfully brings home, but as the Unite the union's workers' plan for steel sets out, with the right Government action this crucial industry can still be saved. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must invest in UK steel, transitioning Britain's remaining blast furnaces to fully decarbonised steel production, saving thousands of skilled jobs and putting Britain at the heart of clean, green steel production?

Jonathan Reynolds: I intend to make the case today that the UK steel industry could have a strong future, but that requires a much better approach than the one we have seen so far.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Jonathan Reynolds: I am cautious of doing so given the warning about time, but I will give way as I know my right hon. Friend has a significant interest in this.

Mark Tami: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He will be aware that I have the privilege of representing Shotton steelworks, and he has been there with me to see the high-quality products made in that profitable plant, but in order to carry on it needs to recruit and retain quality employees. What we have seen, however, is a Government who do not care, and if that message gets through to the workforce we are not going to retain those skills.

Jonathan Reynolds *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Before the hon. Gentleman continues, may I make a point? I understand how this game is played, and interventions are fine, but please understand from the Chair that if Members intervene they are less likely to get called.

Jonathan Reynolds: It was a pleasure to visit the Shotton steelworks with my right hon. Friend last year, and he will know that it began as the Summers steelworks in Stalybridge in my constituency. He has much expertise, and I commend the argument and points he has put forward.

The decisions the Government have made will have consequences. They will have consequences for our national security and our resilience, and they risk leaving us exposed at a time of significant geopolitical instability.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jonathan Reynolds: I will take an intervention from the Government Benches and one more from the Labour Back Benches, if that is okay.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): If the hon. Gentleman is so determined that steel is a resource we as a nation should have, why is the Labour party against the west Cumbrian coalmine, which would mean we would not have to bring in coal from Australia to smelt steel in blast furnaces here?

Jonathan Reynolds: We have considerable expertise in that matter, and that grade of coal is no good for the current way steel is produced in the UK, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the point because the Government justified that coalmine on that basis and have now made a series of decisions that, frankly, makes that look even more absurd.

Today I hope to make the case for Labour's plans for an alternative way forward, an approach that is in no way based on misplaced nostalgia for the past but is instead based on hard-headed realities and an assessment of our national interest.

UK steel should have a bright future. It is not a sunset industry, and it is central to how a modern, low-carbon economy works. I ask the Minister, for whom I have considerable regard, to listen and engage today and to have a serious debate about what is about to happen and be willing to consider the alternative case. Let us please not trade boilerplate rebuttals or pre-scripted lines, but instead ask all colleagues to listen to the rational

case being put forward, which is serious, pragmatic and important and one I genuinely believe any Conservative could agree with.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): Many of my constituents are impacted by this devastating closure, and closing Port Talbot will mean the UK is the only G20 nation unable to make steel. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an appalling decision?

Jonathan Reynolds: Of course, the decision has to be considered in conjunction with the one in Scunthorpe, and that is why this issue is so important and deserves the attention it is getting today.

I want to say one more thing by way of introduction. We have already heard from several Welsh colleagues, and the decision of the Prime Minister and the Business Secretary to refuse even to have a phone call with the First Minister of Wales about this matter was profoundly wrong. Anyone who is a supporter of the Union wants to see productive, effective relationships across all UK Governments, and the Prime Minister's behaviour reflects extremely badly on him on this occasion.

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): Does the hon. Gentleman realise that I was the chairman of the transition board supporting all those workers who face the loss of their jobs? I offered to speak to the First Minister last week. He has so far been too busy to do so. He has known about this potential problem since September, and only when it appeared all over the papers did he suddenly appear to take an interest and want to make phone calls.

Jonathan Reynolds: I think that is a pathetic response. I mean no discourtesy, but that is pathetic. It is entirely reasonable for the First Minister of Wales to seek a conversation with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. I will leave that there.

I acknowledge that in the Public Gallery we have many steelworkers who have made the journey here today, including men such as Alan, who has worked at Port Talbot for 40 years, as did his father and both his grandfathers, and Gary, who has worked there for 37 years, and whose son now works in the hot mill. We have men and women from Port Talbot, Scunthorpe and Trostre who started as apprentices. I want to thank them for the contribution that they and their families have made to the UK over many generations. Last year, I went several times to steel sites across Wales, and I met the workforce at Port Talbot when these plans were first announced. They deserve a lot better than what they are being offered right now. At a minimum, they deserve this place taking their case seriously and engaging with these issues with the respect and consideration they require.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jonathan Reynolds: I can give way one more time, to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham)

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): When I was a young reporter on the *Evening Gazette*, the steel industry supported tens of thousands of jobs on Teesside alone. The decline started with Thatcher. When the

Government abandoned Redcar nine years ago, numbers fell to a few hundred. Steel is a foundation industry. Surely we need primary steelmaking in this country if it has a real future.

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree entirely.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jonathan Reynolds: I will take an intervention from the Government Benches, then one from my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), and then I will take no more.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman overlooking the half a billion pounds that the Government will contribute to Port Talbot, or the £1.25 billion in total? When the Business and Trade Committee visited Port Talbot, we saw a plant badly in need of new investment. This Government are bringing forward that investment and securing a future for the steel industry.

Jonathan Reynolds: I am not ignoring that investment; I am making the case that it is a bad deal and that there is a better deal for the resources available that would satisfy far more of our objectives and give a better future to Port Talbot.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I grew up, like the shadow Minister, in a region ripped apart by the economic vandalism of Thatcher. Is it not the case that the Tories are repeating the mistakes of the past and claiming there is no alternative, when the reality is that steel jobs can not only be saved, but even created, with a proper plan that takes advantage of the global demand for steel—especially low-carbon, green steel—which is going up fast?

Jonathan Reynolds: I agree with that case. That is why this is such an important issue for Parliament to consider. I always acknowledge that there are parts of it that are difficult. Decarbonising industry is an urgent priority, but in some cases the technology is uncertain or expensive. It is my contention, however, that getting it right is more important than doing it quickly or necessarily at the cheapest cost. To state the obvious, we can decarbonise anything by shutting it down. The cheapest path will likely always involve outsourcing most of our industrial production to other places. If we do that—it is the Government's plan for Port Talbot—we will spend millions of pounds, and we will see huge job losses and global emissions rise as we effectively offshore our emissions and then claim that is progress. That would be a fundamental political mistake with potentially enormous ramifications for the future of the transition to net zero. We should know that from our own past.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, when I was a child growing up in the north-east in the 1980s, there was a major transition. We saw the end of coalmining and shipbuilding and the old nationalised industries as we knew them then. Many colleagues across the UK have similar personal experiences. Nobody today would propose that the UK should have an economic or energy policy based around large-scale coalmining, but how we manage the transition is fundamental. In the past, as a country, we have got that wrong. Levelling up—supposedly the Government's flagship policy—is surely a recognition

[Jonathan Reynolds]

that the scars of those years and the impact of deindustrialisation are still felt in many parts of the UK today, yet the Government risk making exactly the same mistakes all over again.

The decision of this Conservative Government to hand over half a billion pounds of taxpayers' money to make thousands of people redundant is quite simply a bad deal. It is a bad deal for workers, a bad deal for taxpayers and a bad deal for the future of our industrial sovereign capability. Worse than that, it sends a message that decarbonisation effectively means deindustrialisation. I put it to Conservative colleagues that if net zero becomes a zero-sum game for working people, that risks the very support that we need to achieve the transition. There must be public consent for the transition, and that requires our economy to benefit from better jobs and better opportunities. This is the real politics of getting net zero right: it is not imaginary meat taxes or made-up claims about seven bins but whether the transition is just and fair and delivers something for Britain's workers. The Government's plans so far are simply none of those things.

The race to decarbonise is a race for jobs and prosperity, and this could be a hugely significant time for steel. As the Minister knows, I have many criticisms of Government policy, and I believe that we have weak business investment, weak productivity and weak growth as a result. I recognise that the Port Talbot site is in a challenging financial position, but the Government have already recognised that uncompetitive energy prices need tackling. We have procurement rules in place that are seeing significant steel content from the UK in infrastructure projects, and we are getting close to carbon border adjustment mechanisms both here and in the EU, which will be a major development. CBAMs in particular will likely completely change the economics of the UK steel industry. There is no reason to believe that the UK cannot have a vibrant steel sector, so to make this irreversible decision now, when the policy background is clearly improving, seems odd indeed. Better options are on the table; anyone claiming otherwise is simply being disingenuous.

When it comes to Port Talbot, there is a specific alternative proposal available—the multi-union Syndex plan—which is not far off Tata's original proposals, which were known as Project Kronus. Other proposals have also been put forward. All we ask is that the Government consider the issues involved and do not make any fundamental decisions that are irreversible.

It is widely accepted at Port Talbot that blast furnace No. 5 is at the end of its life and may need to close, but blast furnace No. 4 will not need to be relined until 2032. For the Government to force that furnace to close now, as we await the arrival of new technologies, is an act of economic vandalism. We acknowledge that electric arc furnaces are part of the answer, but we do not want to put all our eggs in one basket, which means being open to all technologies, and especially direct iron reduction, which is one of the most exciting possibilities.

The counter-arguments put forward so far are not robust. I believe that safety issues could be managed in the same way that they are every day at a major steelworks. The claim that 90% of what Port Talbot does could be met with an electric arc furnace does not stand up, as key products in packaging and automotive materials

cannot be produced in one. At Scunthorpe, I understand that the lack of sufficient grid connections and the cancellation of the first carbon capture programme back in 2010 have severely limited the options available. Again, I ask the Government not to make irreversible decisions, to be open to all technologies and to recognise the growing importance of and demand for steel.

We are not the only country with these challenges, but everywhere we look, other countries are doing it better. Take the Netherlands, where Tata is in negotiations with the Government on DRI technology; Sweden, with the collaboration between SSAB, Vattenfall and LKAB; Canada, where ArcelorMittal signed an agreement some time ago to build a new green steel plant; or the news just in of a \$5 billion investment in a new green steel plant in Saudi Arabia. Everywhere we look, other countries are seeing growth and investment in their steel sector, but we are seeing the opposite. I put the question to Ministers: why is the UK pursuing this path alone?

At Business and Trade oral questions, the Minister has been asked repeatedly—mostly by Government Members—about the assessment the Government have made of becoming the only major economy without primary domestic steel production. Her answers hint that she might get it, but the Government have ploughed on regardless. I ask her again: how can any Government possibly justify making thousands of workers redundant in the name of cutting our carbon footprint only to pay to ship in more carbon-intensive steel from halfway across the world?

It does not have to be this way. We cannot afford to blow this opportunity, repeat the mistakes of the 1980s and leave regional inequality entrenched—we can still see those scars. That is why I always say that, under Labour, decarbonisation will never mean deindustrialisation. I want green steel, and I believe that the workforce are our greatest asset in delivering that. Any real plan for green steel must cover the whole industry. It must be open to all technology that is available, and it should fundamentally be a story of new jobs, new opportunities, new exports and renewed British economic strength, rather than outsourcing our emissions and pretending that that is progress.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. I came here this evening, as I am sure the workers sitting in the Public Gallery did, to see whether there is a genuine plan on the table from the Opposition. The hon. Gentleman said that there would be, but I have heard nothing specific. I have heard about none of the costs involved. He said that he was not interested in nostalgia, but most of the contributions from Opposition Back Benchers have been exactly that. Where is the credible plan B that people want evidence of?

Jonathan Reynolds: It is literally here in my hands. It is not hard to find. I say to Conservative colleagues that Google is their friend. I have tried to say that the plans are available, but we will be pragmatic and flexible. We are just asking that irreversible decisions are not made that limit the room for manoeuvre in future. On resources, we have earmarked £3 billion of investment from our spending plans to deliver this, all of which is predicated on unlocking much larger sums of private investment. The Government do not disagree with the case for

putting money in, but the deal that they are putting forward for that half a billion pounds does not deliver very much at all. What a tragedy it would be in the future to find a Britain that is building homes and infrastructure again, with secure low-carbon energy generation and a new wave of floating offshore wind, but is not making the steel to provide those things.

Labour has a plan to build a better Britain, and we want to build it with steel made in Britain. We will only get one opportunity to get this right, and we must bring workers and steel communities with us. I will finish with what Gary Keogh, a steelworker from Port Talbot told me:

“The question for Tata and the UK Government is this—do we want to be a nation that makes goods, or a nation that imports them from heavily polluting countries? It is not too late for Tata and the UK Government to think again and change course, but time is...running out. If they fail to take a different path now, the people of South Wales will never forgive them, and history won't forgive them either. There is so much at stake for all of us.”

Well said, Gary.

I am asking the Minister—quite honestly, I am begging her—to consider the arguments and what is really value for money, and not to make decisions that are irreversible and prevent a far better outcome in future. To Britain's steelworkers, I say that I know how desperate things feel right now and how angry people are, but there are those of us who get it, who understand what this industry is and why it is important. Given the opportunity, we will deliver the future for steel and the right transition that we all know is essential for our future prosperity, security and wellbeing.

5.33 pm

The Minister for Industry and Economic Security (Ms Nusrat Ghani): First, I want to express my sympathies for the employees of Tata Steel during what is undoubtedly a difficult, tumultuous time. I recognise that Tata Steel's recent announcement means significant uncertainty and upheaval, not just for them but for their families, the people of Port Talbot and other impacted sites.

Port Talbot is built on steel, and the community is proud of its industry and its workforce. After the news from Tata Steel on Friday, the people of Port Talbot are looking to the Government to provide some much-needed stability and as much certainty as possible. My focus, and that of my Secretary of State, my Government and the Secretary of State for Wales, has been to ensure that steelmaking continues at Port Talbot. I want to assure the House that the Government are committed to that, working very closely with Tata Steel—the decision maker—and the Welsh Government to support those affected as much as possible.

The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) talked about a plan, but there was no plan. He talked about honesty, but the honest truth is that the motion is fundamentally performative politics and a major disappointment. The risk was losing steelmaking at Port Talbot, or helping it to transition to cleaner, greener steel.

Mark Tami: Shotton can use imported steel from India, but that is not a long-term alternative. Importing steel from halfway around the world, rolling it, taking it up to north Wales and then exporting it to Europe does not have a green footprint. Does the Minister accept that? How long will it be before the arc furnace is actually built?

Ms Ghani: Steel is infinitely recyclable and we have a glut of it in the UK. We use shy of 3 million tonnes and we export around 8 million tonnes, so we have it within the system and we can recycle it. It has the same chemical compound and it can be used infinitely, so that is the assurance in the supply chain.

As hon. Members will know, Tata Steel will shortly begin a statutory consultation with employees and trade unions as it embarks on a fundamental transformation project to replace its two blast furnaces with state-of-the-art electric arc furnaces. We cannot stop the clock. The technology is here and customers are asking for cleaner, greener steel.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Is not the truth of the matter—I admired, by the way, the shadow Secretary of State's rhetoric—that Port Talbot is a victim of climate militancy and extremism? Net zero zealots do not understand that unless we manufacture in this country, we will extend supply chains and our carbon footprint will grow. Is that not the truth of the matter?

Ms Ghani: I thank my right hon. Friend for that contribution. The truth of the matter is that the Opposition would go harder and greener, faster. At least we are providing the support that Port Talbot needs.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the potential consultation. Tata has a legal obligation to consult the recognised trade unions in a meaningful way to try to avoid redundancies. Will she ensure that those consultations take into consideration the plans that Unite the union, the GMB and Community have on the table to try to save the UK steel industry?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. I spoke to the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who represents Port Talbot, over the weekend, and I reconfirmed that I will do everything in my power to hold Tata to account as it goes through the transition and to ensure that the consultation is as wide and deep as it can be.

Mark Pawsey: Is it not the case that Tata has been losing £1 million a day at this plant, which is old? The Select Committee visited the plant and we saw that it needed replacement. In the absence of discussions with the Government, the plant would have closed some months ago.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is right. Tata Steel is actually losing £1.5 million a day. A statement put out by Tata Steel made it very clear that our investment of £500 million, which is unprecedented for the steel sector, would enable it to safeguard steel production in the UK in the long term. I know that this is a difficult time, but without our investment we would have risked losing steelmaking at Port Talbot.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ghani: I will make a bit of progress and then I will take interventions.

[Ms Ghani]

Tata's proposed plans have the potential to turn around its economic fortunes—it is losing £1.5 million a day—and to deal with emissions, but it is also about adopting new technology and meeting customers' needs. I know that there are huge concerns, because that means job losses. The concerns hon. Members have expressed for the people of Port Talbot are our concerns too, and they are shared by Members right across the House. They have been represented by the Government in our negotiations with the company.

As I said, we are holding Tata to account, ensuring that the transition is managed properly so that every employee receives the support they deserve. That includes £100 million of funding for a dedicated transition board, chaired by the Secretary of State for Wales and including members of the Welsh Government, to support affected employees and to provide a plan to protect and grow the local economy in the next decade. Tata also announced on Friday that on top of that £100 million, it would provide an additional £130-million comprehensive support package for affected employees.

Andrew Percy *rose*—

Ms Ghani: I give way to my hon. Friend, because he has been so patient.

Andrew Percy: I thank my hon. Friend. She has been a friend to those of us on these Benches who have been concerned about our local steel jobs and she has been a champion within Government for our steel industry, so I thank her on behalf of our steelworkers for her support. May I urge her to be cautious in listening to the Opposition, who more than halved the number of people who worked in the industry last time they were in power?

It is clear that customers will want green steel in the future, but does my hon. Friend agree with those of us in Scunthorpe who want to retain a capability of some sort when it comes to virgin steel?

Ms Ghani: The technology has moved on. Although 90% of everything that we need can be made from recycled steel, there is a gap, and Scunthorpe is obviously filling that gap at the moment.

My hon. Friend also made an important point about the Opposition, who are talking about potential job losses. In 1997, 70,000 people worked in the steel industry; by 2010, that number had fallen to 30,600—a fall of 40,000 jobs or 56%. The Labour leader between 2010 and 2015 did not mention the steel industry once in Parliament. Our investment at Port Talbot is the largest that has been made for a substantial period, and although the situation is challenging, without that support there was a massive risk that Tata would have left Port Talbot.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab) *rose*—

Ms Ghani: I give way to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Liam Byrne: I just want to pin something down, because that was an important intervention. On 8 November the Minister said, in reply to a question from the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft), that she thought it was vital to our economic security for these islands to retain their virgin steel-making

capability. I put that position to the Secretary of State this morning, and she refused to confirm it. Will the Minister tell the House today whether it is her position that this country needs the capability to make virgin steel—yes or no?

Ms Ghani: I did follow the debate in the Select Committee, and I think the Secretary of State said that these decisions are commercial but that we will do everything that we can, and that our fundamental priority is to ensure that steelmaking continues in the UK.

Tata Steel's decision has not been taken lightly. This consultation comes against the backdrop of a decade of losses, which were ignored by the Labour party when it was in power. Indeed, Tata's managing director confirmed over the weekend that, as I mentioned earlier, the Port Talbot plant has been bleeding £1.5 million a day. Its decision also comes with a growing awareness that the UK steel industry has to modernise, because that is what customers want and the technology now exists. In those circumstances, businesses are compelled to make difficult decisions and tough changes. In fact, without the opportunity to install a modern electric arc furnace, the future of the plant would have been under serious threat.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Minister and several of her colleagues have mentioned the losses at Port Talbot. Let me remind the House that Tata Steel paid dividends amounting to £1.4 billion to shareholders between 2019 and 2023, and that the group has reserves of £1.6 billion. Would not a sensible solution be to look at what the unions are proposing, and in particular at Unite the union's proposal in its transition plan to retain blast furnace 4 during the transition and build a 3-megaton arc furnace to allow Port Talbot to take advantage of the dramatic increase in demand that we anticipate for green steel?

Ms Ghani: I believe that Tata has been sharing its business plans with the unions. There is anxiety about the multi-union plan because it does not deal with the basic economics of continuing to make steel at Port Talbot. Of course all of us here want to ensure that steelmaking continues in the UK, and this is the model that Tata has put forward to ensure that it does. Electric arc furnaces will be on line in a few years' time, and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are using steel that is already in the UK system and can be recycled.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): There is much talk about blast furnaces. May I remind the House that a blast furnace simply will not function without coking coal? West Cumbria Mining's proposal for Woodhouse colliery would enable the extraction of the highest-quality grade A coking coal, which is absolutely fit for purpose for blast furnaces. Labour seems to be arguing that we should not offshore our carbon emissions, but that is exactly why we should be supporting WCM's proposal—so that we can extract that vital material, coking coal, in the cleanest, greenest way possible.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is a staunch champion of her constituency and she highlights the lack of any sort of sensible plans from the Opposition. They do not want stuff coming in or going out. They will not even support the transition, and they would go harder and faster as well.

Closing the Port Talbot plant would cause immeasurable damage to the town and would be harmful for the UK as a whole, risking all 8,000 jobs that Tata Steel provides across the UK, not to mention the 12,500 jobs in the steel supply chain. That is why the Government are investing £500 million of a total of £1.25 billion towards securing the future of Port Talbot's steel, and an industry that is inextricably linked to the community's history and identity. That investment is a huge step forward, fortifying UK steel production at a time when traditional blast-furnace steelmaking has stopped being viable.

We have heard loud and clear the calls from the unions to keep one blast furnace open for several months during the transition. Tata held discussions with the UK Steel committee and its advisers on this very issue. In response to those concerns, Tata Steel has revised its proposal and continues to operate Port Talbot's hot strip mill throughout the transition period and beyond. However, its position remains that continued blast-furnace production is neither feasible nor affordable, and the risk is that we would lose steelmaking at Port Talbot. An electric arc furnace provides us with greater resilience and the ability to absorb shocks in the global supply chain by reducing our dependency on raw material imports. Quite simply, UK steel will be ready for whatever the future holds with state-of-the-art modern equipment.

Just as crucially, the transformation is pivotal to the Government's ambition to position the UK at the forefront of the growing global economy. Alongside the UK's proposal for the Celtic freeport and the land at Port Talbot, which Tata expects to release for transfer or sale following the transition from blast furnaces, the investment would unlock thousands of new jobs in south Wales and the wider UK economy. I should also remind the House that the Tata Group continues to make significant investments in the UK's industries of the future, including through its plans to open a £4 billion battery gigafactory in Somerset, creating 4,000 direct jobs. That will be a game changer for this country that will position us to thrive in the decades ahead.

Jonathan Reynolds: I very much recognise the case that the Minister makes for Tata's investment in the UK, but will she just be clear with the House on whether the subsidy package for Port Talbot that we are talking about is in any way linked to the subsidy package and the decision to build the gigafactory in Somerset?

Ms Ghani: That is just another performative politics intervention—[*Interruption.*] No, those are completely separate things. We are talking about the future of the steel sector in the UK and in Port Talbot. The discussions have been going on for years. They are discussions that did not take place when the Opposition were in power. They left it alone and the technology has moved on, but what we have been able to do, even though it is difficult, is ensure that steelmaking continues in the UK by providing it with unprecedented levels of funding. There was no plan presented when the hon. Member spoke at the Dispatch Box. We have been able to ensure that steelmaking will continue at Port Talbot.

Understandably, Members might ask why the Government are not working harder to maintain these particular blast furnaces but, as the hon. Gentleman said, they are at the end of their lives and the cost does not work any more, and nor do they meet the needs of customers. I say this again: without the support, there

would have been a complete risk of Tata Steel not continuing to making steel in the UK. We know that the 20th-century way of producing steel is no longer fit for purpose for the UK in the 21st century. The UK's blast furnaces, such as those at Port Talbot, are reaching the end of their operational lives, and a transition from blast furnaces to electric furnaces will also increase our supply chain resilience, making the UK less reliant on imports of raw materials for steelmaking.

Sir Robert Goodwill: My hon. Friend is making valid points. We have no domestic iron ore mining or, at the moment, domestic coalmining to feed blast furnaces. What we do have, as I observed when I was shipping Minister, is massive heaps of scrap steel in every single port. This is currently being exported to China to come back again as steel. Surely the best way to keep the plant open is to use the scrap steel that is currently on our doorstep?

Ms Ghani: That is the honest conversation that we have to have in this House and with the public. We have ample scrap steel in the UK economy. We use shy of 3 million tonnes of scrap steel, and we export 8 million tonnes. We could use that scrap steel, which can be recycled infinitely, to provide us with supply chain resilience while reducing our carbon footprint.

The UK exports more scrap steel, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, than any other country apart from the United States. We have a plentiful and reliable supply of scrap metal in the UK for electric arc furnace production, and this is made into new steel products for British and other manufacturers. The scrap sourced here in the UK reduces our need to import steel from China and other countries.

We are backing UK-made steel and, crucially, we are backing it in the right way, by investing hundreds of millions of pounds to help the industry to thrive in increasingly challenging global markets. We cannot stop the clock. The technology and the customer demand is already here. Our commitment is clear from our emergency covid support to Celsa Steel and our unprecedented package of support for the steelworks at Port Talbot. We continue to work closely with the industry to secure a sustainable and competitive future for the sector and its workers.

Our commitment is clear from initiatives such as the British industry supercharger, which will reduce electricity costs for the steel industry and other energy-intensive industries, bringing them closer in line with the charges in other major economies. That is complemented by the £730 million in energy costs relief that we have given to the steel sector since 2013.

However, investment is only part of the story. The Government have also implemented a robust trade remedies framework to protect British businesses, British jobs and British goods from unfair trading practices and unmanageable surges in imports. Equally, we have not shied away from advocating for the UK steel industry abroad by resolving market access constraints and working with our partners in the US and the EU to boost access for UK steel exports. I am proud that my Department is involved in that work.

As well as our efforts to protect our steel industry on the international stage, the Government recognise that contracts for major public projects are a vital source of

[Ms Ghani]

income for our home-grown steel producers. In the financial year 2021-22, those contracts were worth more than £600 million, which is one reason why, last April, we published an updated steel procurement policy note that emphasised the importance of early engagement among producers, suppliers and buyers, so that British steel production has a fair shot at job-creating, growth-spurring projects here in the UK.

Clearly, Tata's decision, and any decision like it, has both national and local consequences. As we have seen over the years, when dealing with huge amounts of investment, global supply chains and national infrastructure it is easy to lose sight of the communities, families and individuals who are impacted. I believe the deal is in the long-term best interests of all parties. However, I recognise that many of those who are impacted in the immediate term will feel differently. That is precisely why we established a transition board, which was announced in September. It is up and running, ahead of any formal process taking place, so that we can be in the best position to support the local people, businesses and communities impacted by the transition.

I know that Members want to have an honest discussion about steelmaking in the UK. Without such record-breaking investment, there may not have been any steelmaking at Port Talbot.

Stephen Crabb: The Minister is making an important point about having an honest conversation, part of which is about recognising that almost from the day that Tata bought the Corus assets it has been looking for the taxpayer to subsidise the plant to keep it operational. From refurbishing and relining the blast furnaces to direct subsidies from the Welsh and UK Governments, as well as strongarming us into offloading the pension scheme, Tata has needed Government help almost from day one to keep the plant operational. In having that honest conversation, will the Minister please keep in mind that the community in Port Talbot will need massive investment to get it through this change?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely, and that is why we have the transition board. We have made money available to ensure that we help local communities. The other change is that customers now want cleaner, greener steel, so there is a market for using electric arc furnaces.

I assure the House that this Government will be at the side of the people of Port Talbot and other impacted sites over the months and years ahead, and we will continue to strive to secure a better future for them and for UK steel.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I ask everybody to resume their seats. This is a time-limited debate and we do not have much time because of the pressure of other business today. That is why there is a three-minute limit. The Front Benchers will get eight minutes each to respond—I cannot give any less because it is only fair that there is a proper Opposition response and a Government response to that. I ask Members to be mindful when making interventions, please, and to make them short. I call Marion Fellows.

5.55 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I almost want to repeat the speech that I have given on steel for the past eight and a half years, but I will resist that temptation. The biggest problem we have is that the Tory Government do not do steel. They may be coming up with a plan now, but since I came here in 2015 the all-party group on steel and metal related industries has tried to get movement on an industrial strategy and get steel at the heart of what we do, and it has been ignored.

When Tata sold the Dalzell mill in Motherwell to the Scottish Government for £1, two taskforces were set up in 2015: the UK Government one, which went absolutely nowhere, and the Scottish steel taskforce, which saved Dalzell. Steel is really important—it is a foundation industry—and steelmakers are, as I can testify, a different type of people. The unions have done great work in coming together and moving the industry forward. I agree with the Labour motion, but I have some doubts as to what a Labour Government would do, as there have been so many tosses and turns, and U-turns, in what Labour has been saying.

Let me return to the issue of Port Talbot. We in Motherwell and Wishaw, and the surrounding areas, know only too well the cost of the closure of a large steel plant—we had huge redundancies. I am talking about the economic and social costs. We know that manufacturing jobs are only the start of the impact of the jobs losses and that they will be felt right across the Welsh economy.

Under the multi-union plan, it was hoped that Tata Steel could transition Port Talbot towards greener steelmaking over a longer timeframe. Tata Steel intends to replace existing manufacturing processes with an electric arc furnace which, as we know, makes steel from scrap and requires a much smaller workforce. I find it hard to believe that Tata will invest £750 million to finance the restructuring, backed by £500 million from the UK Government, yet all these jobs are going. It is almost as if the Government are paying Tata to make people redundant.

A statement by the GMB and Community, which drafted the multi-union plan, noted:

"It is an absolute disgrace that Tata Steel, and the UK Government, appear intent on pursuing the cheapest instead of the best plan for our industry, our steelworkers and our country."

I agree on that. We in the Scottish National party recognise the need to reduce our emissions and reach net zero targets, but we are equally clear that it is vital that the individuals and communities most impacted by the green transition must be at the heart of the decisions made by Governments. A just transition must have at its heart fairness and transparency for the workers affected. In the case of Tata Steel, it is clear that the impact of the closures on the workers has been an afterthought.

Diane Coyle, the economist, says:

"The UK's industrial policy...has been characterised by frequent policy reversals and announcements, driven by political cycles",

and there is an enduring inability to effectively co-ordinate the

"multiple...public bodies, departments and levels of government...responsible for delivery."

Those of us with steel industries in our constituencies can attest to that. There has not been a proper industrial plan in all the time that I have been here.

Last week, our First Minister highlighted how independence offers an alternative to a lack of direction and ambition, with an industrial policy. That is what an independent Scotland will have: an industrial policy, which has been lacking here since I first came to this place in 2015. The fact that the replacement for the blast furnaces in Port Talbot will not be operational until 2027 at the earliest raises concerns from both a national security and an environmental perspective.

It is completely meaningless, as we have already heard, to close the furnaces in Port Talbot in an attempt to lower emissions if we are then going to be reliant on equally energy-intensive steel imports from other countries until at least 2027, and if the UK Government do not take measures to ensure that the UK is on par with the EU when it comes to investing in green technologies. As has already been said, we will be importing from India and China, two of the most polluting countries on the planet.

The UK Government will also be the only G20 country that does not produce its own virgin steel. That clearly poses concerns from a national security perspective. Unite the union recently summed up this ludicrous situation, noting:

“The government needs to invest in British industry in order to defend workers and communities as well as our industrial base and our national security. Instead, they are giving Tata hundreds of millions of pounds to fund their plan to cut jobs, cut capacity and give more business to their plants in other countries, like India and the Netherlands. How is that acceptable?”

The shocking decision made by Tata in Port Talbot may not have a direct consequence on Dalzell steelworks in Motherwell, in my constituency. However, the decisions being made at British Steel in Scunthorpe and Port Talbot put the future of steelmaking in the UK at risk. I am happy to pledge my support to the alternative plan put to Tata with the backing of industry experts Syndex and both Community and GMB trade unions.

The market need for UK-produced steel has increased as projects within the UK are asking for UK content. Dalzell steelworks markets itself as steel rolled in the UK, produced from steel made in Scunthorpe. If British Steel goes the same way as Tata, we will lose the only remaining UK steelmaker that can supply steel suitable for plate, and that is just madness. When Tata closed Dalzell and Clydebridge, the UK lost its ability to roll plate for submarines and other industrial purposes, such as wind turbines.

This Tory Government do not understand manufacturing. The all-party parliamentary group for steel and metal-related industries has been pushing for years and years. I notice the Minister mentioned the reduction in electricity costs, but how long did it take this Government to come forward with that plan? We have been telling them for years that we could not be competitive and that energy costs would have an effect on British steelmaking.

Many people are still waiting to speak. In Motherwell and Wishaw our hearts go out to folk in steel who are losing their jobs. We know how it feels and we know how long it takes to build a community back up again. We in the SNP support the motion.

6.3 pm

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): The news from Tata Steel is extremely concerning, and it leaves Scunthorpe as the last place in the whole of the UK that is able to make virgin steel. It is incredible to me that I am here again making the argument to retain the UK's virgin steelmaking capability. There have been challenges from across the House on those views, so I will go into detail about some of those challenges.

Some people seem to think that we can make whatever we need in an electric arc furnace. It is true that the range of products is increasing all the time and will continue to expand, but those products are dependent on scrap and all scrap is not equal. We may have the correct tonnage of scrap in this country, but no one has yet convinced me that it is the correct quality of scrap. That is a really important point that we need to recognise.

People have said that we do not export iron ore from this country. That is incorrect; we do export iron ore as a country. People say that we do not have coking coal capability in this country. That is incorrect, because there is a perfectly good metallurgical coal mine in Cumbria waiting to be used. Some will make the argument about reducing the carbon footprint of steel products, using a purely electric arc model, to which I would again point out that many products melted in an electric arc furnace require an input of virgin steel in the mix. People on the works have told me—I listen to them because they know their stuff—that some of those products that they want to make in an EAF will need 30% virgin steel in the mix.

Andrew Percy: Is it not then clear that, given what my hon. Friend has said, it is vital that the Government negotiations with British Steel retain that virgin steel capability?

Holly Mumby-Croft: My hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about steel, is absolutely right. We need to remember that if we are not making that virgin steel here in the UK, it will come from someone else's blast furnaces, probably from the other side of the world. We will have no control over the emissions or how that steel is produced. We will have no control over the welfare of the people who make it. The steel will then be put on a ship—a ship with a diesel engine, not a sail—and driven over here to be thrown into our electric arc furnaces to make that mix.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The more that we make in this country—the more food we grow; the more products we produce—the more essential our manufacturing base becomes, and not just for our economic resilience and wellbeing, but for our move to this wonderful carbon-neutral future, which is so beloved of so many.

Holly Mumby-Croft: My right hon. Friend is correct. Put simply, unless we are going to stop using virgin steel in this country, we should have the ability to make it ourselves, so that we can take responsibility for those emissions and for the production methods, and for the working conditions of those who make the products.

Last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence remarked that we are entering a pre-war world. A strong—or at least “in existence”—steelmaking industry is a core part of our nation's defence capability.

[Holly Mumby-Croft]

We may choose to buy the steel that we need for our defence from other countries—whether or not I agree with that—but resilience is not only about what we choose to do in future; it is also about what we may need to do, or what we may need to have the capability to do should the need arise.

On 18 September, I asked my hon. Friend the Minister for Industry and Economic Security whether she agreed that

“for national security reasons alone, we must ensure that we retain the capability to make virgin steel in this country”.

As I said in the urgent question that I later secured, that was confirmed to me by the Secretary of State the very same day, and I took contemporaneous notes of that conversation. On 18 September, my hon. Friend the Minister commented that I was correct on the importance of virgin steel, stating:

“obviously, we need a place for virgin steel, and that is in her constituency.”—[*Official Report*, 18 September 2023; Vol. 737, c. 1125.]

I have no problem with building electric arc furnaces—it is a good idea—but I passionately believe that the UK should retain, at least in the medium term, some blast furnace capability alongside that. After the sad news in Port Talbot, that has to be in Scunthorpe.

On 6 October, British Steel set out its plans, which it says are subject to appropriate support from the Government. They are the content of the negotiations that my hon. Friend is working so hard on. They talk about installing two electric arc furnaces, one in Scunthorpe and one in Teesside, and they propose maintaining current operations until a transition to electric arc steelmaking.

I want to be crystal clear: I expect the company to keep to its word on this. If we are to give British Steel hundreds of millions of pounds of public money, we need to ensure that it retains those blast furnaces until the transition. In short, that must be written into the deal. I do not want the sad events happening in Port Talbot to happen to my people in Scunthorpe. I do not want to see blast furnaces switched off early and steel being brought in from abroad and rolled in our mills. I want those blast furnaces to be on for as long as possible, maintaining jobs and keeping options open, so that we can explore alternative technologies, just as other countries are doing.

6.9 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Port Talbot steelworks is the beating heart of our community. Generation after generation have worked in that steelworks. Port Talbot is the steelworks, and the steelworks is Port Talbot. Every time I go into that steelworks, though, I do not see something to be sentimental about; I see a hotbed of innovation. I see a workforce who are deeply committed to change and ready to embrace change. This is not about some kind of request for charity or hand-outs; this is about asking for a level playing field. This is about saying that we make the best steel that money can buy.

But for 14 long years we have been competing with one hand tied behind our backs. For 14 years we have been forced to pay twice as much for our energy as our

French and German competitors. For 14 years we have seen Government contracts going to foreign steel companies. For 14 years we have seen our Government completely fail to support our steel industry in anything like the way that our competitors are doing.

Let me be absolutely clear: when we look at the deal that is now on the table, we see that it does not work for jobs, it does not work for decarbonisation, and it does not work for our national security. On jobs, 2,800 jobs are set to go, with £500 million of taxpayers' money to pay for that privilege. On decarbonisation, the deal is based on importing millions of tons of steel from India, where steel production is 30% to 40% more carbon intensive. I am not sure if anyone has noticed, but India is 5,000 miles away, so the carbon footprint will be huge. We are literally exporting jobs from Wales to India, and importing carbon from India to Wales.

I urge Tata Steel to look again at the multi-union plan and to take the bridge, not the cliff edge. Its deal will send our workforce—our proud communities—over that cliff edge. That is not something we can accept. We have to recognise that the trade unions have put together a compelling plan; a plan that would keep one of the blast furnaces going while the transition to an electric arc furnace takes place. That is the right way—the balanced and sustainable way—of doing this. Our country needs its steel. Let's value it. Let's stand up and fight for it.

6.12 pm

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): There is no question but that this is an extremely worrying time for families in Port Talbot and for the community at large. I know the community extremely well, and my father was a welder at the basic oxygen steelmaking plant in the steelworks for more than 30 years. Port Talbot is a community where everyone knows someone who is related to the steelworks in some way. The scale of the impact that this will have on the community should not be underestimated. It is not just the jobs themselves. There will be the contractual jobs and the associated roles with those contractual jobs, so there is a significant multiplier that follows on.

Of course, this is not the first time that we have been in this position or that the steelworks have been under threat. I can remember tens of thousands of people working there when I was growing up in the 1970s. The reality is that in 2016 we were in a similar position, when Tata planned to close the plant but, in opposition to what the Government are now claiming, the UK Government proactively worked with Tata to encourage a sale and, in the interim, the price of steel rose, which has given us a much longer lifespan for the site.

I want to point out that the commitment that Tata has shown is significant and needs to be recognised, because it has lost millions of pounds over time. In the close of 2018, as Secretary of State for Wales, I went to Mumbai to meet the chairman and chief executive of Tata, and to express my concern that the price of steel at that time was falling, and I wanted to know what their plans were. That is the proactivity with which the Government maintained an interest over time in seeking to support the industry and to support steel.

Sir John Hayes: I take my right hon. Friend's point about commerciality, but the truth is that we can and should protect those core industries that are at the heart

of our manufacturing capacity. If we open ourselves up to cheap foreign imports with huge environmental costs, we are bound to end in a situation of the kind he describes. I thank him and, in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) for their work, but it is for the Government to prioritise British jobs and British manufacturers.

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, and I strongly agree with him. That is the proactivity that the Government have sought to pursue. I should correct the record, by the way: it was in November 2019 that I went to Mumbai to meet Tata.

However, the reality is that every time a Member of this House, on either side of the Chamber, has called for us to go further and faster and to be ahead of the curve in the green transition, another nail has been put in the coffin of heavy industry such as Tata in Port Talbot. That is the reality of the position. When we have passed climate change legislation here we have heard many Opposition Members—those who are now seeking to defend the jobs—saying that the Government are not doing enough on our green transition.

The £500 million is a significant sum, and we should not play it down. We must also remember that this is a devolved responsibility. Pre-devolution, that money would have been coming out of the Welsh block. We all know that since 2016 the Welsh Government have done nothing to reinvest in the plant after we managed to save it from closure, so I find it churlish when the Minister in the Welsh Government says he needs hundreds of millions. Those are the people calling for further devolution and further responsibility, but ultimately there is no accountability for the decisions, because investment in industry is a devolved function.

However, thanks to the Union and thanks to the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, the UK Government can invest in the steelworks in Wales. That is the same Act that the Opposition voted against and to which the Welsh Assembly would not even approve a legislative consent motion in order for it to pass.

In the limited time I have, I also want to point out this is a two-blast furnace site; having one blast furnace operational makes it even more inefficient, and it will lose more money. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) highlighted a really important point about an arc furnace, and I have not heard the automotive sector say that it is content with that. Finally, I hope we will have a development corporation in order to save the economy in the area.

6.16 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I add my voice to the chorus asking the Minister to rethink the strategy and this deal comprehensively. At the heart of this debate is a simple truth: what the Government have offered us is a half-measure, and it is a half-measure that now threatens job security, economic security and climate security. Frankly, that is a price not worth paying.

The threat to job security has been well laid out by hon. Members this afternoon. It is not just 2,800 jobs at the steelworks itself; three times as many jobs will be lost because of the economic shock to the community. Here we have a situation where £500 million of taxpayers' money is being forked out and up to 12,000 people are going to be thrown out of work.

The second point, which we must not let the Minister elude this afternoon, is that there has clearly been a change of Government policy on whether this country needs its own sovereign capability to make virgin steel. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) spoke brilliantly and eloquently about precisely why we need to keep that capability in this country, and she was right to say that, in response to her urgent question in November last year, the Minister gave the House the very clear impression that she would defend a policy of His Majesty's Government that we will retain sovereign capability for virgin steelmaking in this country.

However, when I asked the Secretary of State not once, but three times today whether it was the policy of His Majesty's Government to keep that capability in this country, she declined to answer on all three occasions. She said that that was not a decision for Government to make, but a decision for industry—and, in her words, we might as well be trying to encourage people to keep typewriters. I do not think that is an appropriate response to a fundamental question of economic security.

The third point, of course, is on climate security, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) laid out very clearly. Tata has been very clear that it will honour its contract by importing steel from India. We know that that is 40% more carbon-intensive than steel made in this country and that other imports may now come in from China, where about 70% of the power is from dirty coal. That is bad for job security, it is bad for economic security and it is bad for climate security.

At the very least, we could have expected the Government to lay out a better plan that dealt with questions such as how we will guarantee the scrap supply, given that we now export 77% of our scrap and do not have a strategy to ensure that it is kept here in the event that the future is indeed in electric arc furnaces. We have not had a strategy on how to keep direct reduced iron technology here, and Tata is proposing to build that capability in Holland. So £500 million goes out the door, job security goes down, technology goes to Holland and dirty steel comes in. That is a bad deal and it needs rethinking.

6.19 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): That was a brilliant contribution from the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

This afternoon, steelworkers from Port Talbot, Llanwern and beyond are up in the Public Gallery. They have come here today to ask the Government to step up after last week's announcement from Tata. On their behalf, we implore Ministers to pursue, before it is too late, all avenues to secure a longer, fairer transition that supports our steel industry and jobs. We need a meaningful consultation with the trade unions and full consideration of the alternative options that they have proposed, because we want the best for steel, not the cheapest, which is what we have before us.

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend is a great champion for steelmaking in Llanwern. Does she agree that the negative impact of the Government's plans for steel in south Wales will be massive? Will electric arc furnaces be suitable for the Zodiac line at Llanwern?

Jessica Morden: Indeed, last week's announcement was devastating for Port Talbot, for the people from Newport who travel to work there, and for communities across wider south Wales. Over 18 months, 2,800 Port Talbot workers have been affected, and Tata expects that 300 further roles could be impacted at Llanwern in Newport East in around three years' time. As my hon. Friend says, that would affect the Zodiac line, which produces world-class automotive steel and was the best processing line in the world when it was built—it remains one of the best. As the unions have highlighted, Zodiac will, in the short term, be reliant on imports. Big questions remain about the quality of steel produced in electric arc furnaces. These are high-value products, and it is a precarious position for Llanwern to be in.

As has often been repeated in recent days, no matter how the Government dress it up, they are giving Tata £500 million to make 3,000 people redundant. In so doing, they are ending our ability to make virgin steel—the only major economy in the world to do so—and that is shameful. It leaves us reliant on imports at a time when demand for steel, which we will desperately need for our green infrastructure, is only growing, and at greater cost. The imported steel will come over here, as the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) said, on diesel-fuelled vessels, shipped thousands of miles from countries with lower environmental standards.

It does not have to be so. As others have said, an alternative plan has been proposed by the steel unions. We pay tribute to them for the fight that they put up on behalf of their members. The Syndex plan is credible and based on a phased transition over a decade. Officials at Tata have acknowledged to unions that the union plan was serious and deliverable, but would not commit to the extra funding. The Government must step up, as other countries are doing—in fact, there cannot be a developed country in the world that approaches the matter in a worse way than this one.

Labour will step up. A general election cannot come soon enough for our steel industry. We have long pledged a £3 billion fund to decarbonise UK steel production. This Government's plan is not a serious one; it is yet another sticking plaster from a Government without a proper industrial strategy. We have had 12 steel Ministers since 2010, and six in the last four years alone.

Let me address the attacks made this week by the Secretary of State for Wales at a time of awful news. This deal was done without Welsh Government or trade union support. Welsh Ministers have repeatedly contacted UK Business Ministers. The First Minister tried to get a phone call with the Prime Minister on Friday but was not allowed one. The Welsh Government have used all the levers that they have. We must not allow the UK Government to make irreversible decisions. Not only is steel part of Wales's history, but it is vital to our greener future.

6.24 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of Unite, and totally support the union's plan to move forward. I congratulate my party's Front-Bench team on securing the debate. This debate should not be about political sides—it should not be about Members taking the Government's side against the Opposition because we secured the

debate. This debate is about national security, national industry and national prosperity. I congratulate the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft), who stood aside from the politics and looked at the real issue.

There are also issues here about the blast furnace technology. I am one of the very few Members in this place who served as an apprentice and worked in a foundry, so I understand the issues we are talking about. As has already been said by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe and other Members, virgin steel is hugely important, because we want to increase our defence manufacturing. We have the AUKUS deal, under which we want to build submarines in conjunction with Australia and the United States. That will have a huge impact, and if we do not have blast furnaces, we will not have the capability to do that.

When we recycle steel that has already been produced—this has been said before, but I will repeat it—it contains significant impurities because of the uses it has had, and cannot be turned into virgin steel. That is what we have to come back to when we talk about how we produce that steel. If we do not do so, we will not be able to meet our defence, engineering and manufacturing commitments, which is not what the United Kingdom wants. That manufacturing is an industry that we want to take forward.

As far as I am concerned, this is a grubby deal by Tata. All it wanted to do was get hold of our steel industry, hijack it, get rid of our workers from the line, and bring steel back from that company's highly polluting Indian plants. This has not been said today, but as somebody who has worked in the industry, I want to be clear that our steel industry and our steelworkers do not think that our people should be sacrificed at the altar of the so-called green technology that Tata is pushing—I think the intention is something quite different. We need to realise as a nation that this is our security, this is our prosperity, and this is what we need to do.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. If people could shave about half a minute off their speeches, we will be able to get everybody in. Otherwise, we will not.

6.27 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is both tragic and shocking that we are faced with the potential closure of the last blast furnace in Port Talbot before greener technologies for producing primary steel are developed and operational, and even before the proposed electric arc furnace is up and running. This Conservative UK Government must bear their share of the responsibility for this appalling situation. The Government boast about the grubby little deal they made with Tata in September, spending half a billion pounds to lose 2,800 jobs in Port Talbot and leave the UK as the only country in the G20 without its own steelmaking capacity, at the mercy of world markets with the risk of price hiking, not to mention the national security risk of losing our own primary steelmaking capacity.

Instead, the Government should have been negotiating a proper deal such as the multi-union plan to ensure a just transition. They should have been protecting jobs, keeping the blast furnace going until other production

means are fully up and running, and recognising that the electric arc furnace can only be part of the solution. Yes, let us recycle more steel in the UK, but we must recognise that that is not suitable for all our needs. We should also be developing green technologies such as hydrogen and direct reduction of iron to do the primary production of steel, as Labour has proposed, committing £3 billion—not half a billion—to work with the industry to make that just transition a reality.

The tin plate industry is synonymous with Llanelli. It is a central part of our industrial history, and today's Tata plant in Trostre makes a range of different materials that go on to be used in things like food cans and aerosols. Currently, we receive our steel from Port Talbot, just some 20 miles down the railway track, which makes good economic and environmental sense. Tata tells us that when it closes the blast furnace, we will be importing steel. That imported steel will be made in blast furnaces abroad, so there will be no saving in carbon emissions—quite the opposite. Processes abroad will be much dirtier, and then of course there are the costs and emissions from transporting the steel to Trostre. The challenge will be sourcing an appropriate quality of steel to satisfy Trostre's needs, and as Trostre makes a number of products and serves a number of different customers, that means steel of the right quality to satisfy all those needs.

We will be very much more vulnerable to logistical difficulties and price fluctuations if we have to import steel. If there is a shortage of supply, foreign producers may well prioritise their home customers.

As for the recycled steel produced in the electric arc furnace, when it eventually comes into production, there is still a lot of work to be done to assess its suitability for the different products that Trostre produces and its acceptability to our customers. It may be that some products can use electric arc furnace steel, but that will depend on the quality of the feedstock that is put in, and there is a strong case for having two smaller electric arc furnaces to provide those different qualities. Then there is the challenge of sourcing the feedstock, and not just sourcing it, but sorting it and trialling it. All this takes time.

In the meantime, we need Tata to keep the blast furnace going. The electric arc furnace should be only part of the solution, the other part being the development of green primary steel-making. I pay tribute to the trade unions, and we now need Tata to work with the trade unions—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Could Members shave time off their speeches, otherwise not everybody will get in?

6.30 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Deputy Speaker, you may be wondering why on earth the Member for the northernmost mainland constituency in the UK, very far away from Port Talbot, is taking part in this debate. However, a bit like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), I got my fingers dirty working in an oil fabrication yard in a place called Nigg. Some of the mightiest structures in the North sea were built there, and I am proud to have worked there when I did. Those structures, which

are still working today, were made out of the best of British steel. The steel did not come from anywhere else; they were made out of British steel.

I thank the Government for the decision to allow the Cromarty firth in my constituency to become a green freeport. One of the great dreams we have where I live is that with the skills we still have locally—the welders, the fabricators and the riggers who are still of working age—we could start to fabricate floating offshore wind structures in the yard once again. That is our dream. At its height when I worked in that yard, 5,000 people worked in it, and we dream of seeing the flash of the welder's torch and hearing the clang of steel once again. However, to do that we are going to need the best of British steel—not rubbishy stuff, but the best—that will stand up to the mighty storms of the North sea. What I am saying is that, yes, I hear the impassioned pleas about making virgin steel in the UK, but I am talking about further down the line where we can use it and where we want to use it desperately badly.

I am going to keep this short, but we have fallen a long way back. One of the shattering statistics is that, while we were still in the EU—towards our last days there—the UK had fallen to being the eighth in the whole of the EU in steel production. We were actually behind Belgium. This is the country of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the country that built the Forth rail bridge, the country of steel, and it was steel that made this country great, so I support the motion with great passion. Believe you me, it has my full support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much.

6.32 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Steel is a strategically important industry for Wales and for the entire UK. It is vital in supporting the green transition, from energy generation to electric cars. This is not just about a fair transition, but about having the security of supply that is essential to any transition at all. As we enter the new era of Great British Nuclear and small modular reactors in places such as Trawsfynydd, there is no sense and no rational strategy in the Government committing their successors to buying thousands of tonnes of new steel—and from where? From China? We do not even know what assessment the Government have made. Does the UK need security of supply from being able to produce virgin steel in future—yes or no—and what is the Government's role in that respect?

Plaid Cymru has called for action to ensure that ownership of the Welsh steel industry is returned to Welsh public control. This would involve nationalisation, and then recapitalisation through green bonds, with a view to mutualising and creating a Welsh steel co-operative. We could save the banks in 2008; why can we not save steel now? Look at Germany, where the Government spent €2.6 billion in state aid to steel producers for decarbonisation projects only last year. That is the scale of intervention that we need. We must also learn from countries such as Spain, Canada and Sweden, which are already investing in their capacity to produce primary steel through green hydrogen furnaces. There are lessons here for Wales. There are suggestions that a closed-loop cycle could be created in south Wales, whereby floating offshore wind is not only used for electricity but to make green hydrogen for local heavy industry, including steel production.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

If we had better control over the Crown Estate, we could tie these procurement requirements into those contracts. We could put local procurement as a priority. Where is the vision? Where is the vision in saying that only central Government can manage this, given the current state of the nation in the United Kingdom? These are the sorts of exciting opportunities we should be grasping now in Wales, yet we are being let down once again by a Westminster Government who are intent on stripping Welsh assets while leaving the Senedd to bear the costs of communities and individual lives thrown on the scrap heap.

Yes, the Labour party is also promising a transition fund for the steel industry, but how can we believe it will ever be implemented, when it continues to scale back on its £28 billion green investment pledge? Solutions from Westminster are a dead end; only with control over our own resources, such as through a Welsh steel co-operative and the devolution of the Crown Estate, can Wales embark on its own journey towards a greener and fairer future.

To close, Mr Speaker—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I am afraid that time is up; I do apologise.

6.35 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): First, I declare my interests as a member of the GMB and the all-party parliamentary group for steel and metal related industries.

I have to say how utterly frustrating and disappointing it is to be here as a former shadow steel Minister, hearing the same arguments that all of us on this side and some other hon. Members across the House have been making on these issues for decade that the Government simply have not listened to. They have been asleep at the wheel: there has been no industrial strategy and no vision for the future of steel, and there has been a revolving door of Ministers in and out of Government. I am deeply frustrated that, after all those arguments we have made in good faith, we have come to this point.

This is totally the wrong approach for the proud workers I was privileged to meet outside Parliament today and who are with us in the Gallery. It is totally the wrong approach for the economy of south Wales. It is not just about the workers and the jobs directly at Tata; it is also about the related industries: the electricians, engineers, rail workers, hauliers and all who work in that interconnected economy that is so crucial to the backbone of south Wales—the cafés, too—and all the families who rely on those highly paid jobs.

Workers who are willing to embrace change, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said, now face being let down by this Government. It is totally the wrong approach. When it comes to carbon emissions, we have heard how it will lead to imports of lower quality steel and higher carbon steel—steel that is coming in with higher carbon emissions on transport, as has been set out so clearly in the debate. And it is totally the wrong approach for our national security. The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) was absolutely right to raise concerns about our defence industry and to talk about the need for speciality steels.

I know what an electric arc furnace can produce—I have one in my constituency and it is run by an excellent company that does excellent work providing steel to our critical national infrastructure—but it cannot produce all the steels we need for our economy. At a time of geopolitical risk, at a time when our supply chains are under threat, at a time when we want to invest in new green technologies and at a time when we face threats from major countries around the world, to be abandoning our capacity, our national security and our foundational industries is utterly irresponsible.

I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon for what he has been doing to stand up for his workers and my hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and others. I want to praise my constituency colleague the Welsh Minister for the Economy, Vaughan Gething, and indeed the First Minister. I have to say this to the Ministers on the Treasury Bench: I like them personally, but it is simply not good enough for the Prime Minister not to pick up the phone to the First Minister. He picked up the phone to me about issues when he was Chancellor, so why is he not doing that now and calling the First Minister? Where is the Secretary of State? She has not been speaking to the Welsh Economy Minister, Vaughan Gething. She needs to put aside partisan differences, get around the table and work with us to find solutions on this, and she is not doing it. And where is the Chancellor? Fundamentally he has been involved in this deal, which appears to be delivering very little; where is he on this? They need to get with the programme.

We need to look at the multi-union led plan. We need to listen to what our unions are saying, listen to what the workers are saying, not make irreversible decisions, and make sure there is a future for the steel industry in this country.

6.38 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): First, I express my concerns on behalf of the 2,800 workers at Port Talbot who will lose their jobs and the many others in that community and the surrounding area who will feel the knock-on ramifications of this decision. It is a situation that all too many communities in Scotland, and indeed across the UK, remember from the toxic legacy of the Government's industrial policies in the 1980s, when the rapid enforced decline of heavy industry across too many places was progressed with. That toxic legacy gives us a prime example, if we needed one, of how not to go about an industrial transition. With the rejection of the multi-union plan, it seems that the present-day Government have learned no lesson in that regard.

Make no mistake: this decision is economically, environmentally and strategically inept. It means that the UK takes a step closer to being the only state in the G20 without the capacity to make its own virgin steel. That is a risk to security, but it also means that the UK is effectively outsourcing the emissions associated with the production of that virgin steel, while unforgivably offshoring the jobs. That is not a just transition; it is just plain daft.

The green transition that we know we need to make should be a main driver of economic growth in the decades ahead, and we can see how Governments in the

EU and in the US who get to grips with that challenge can drive forward that investment. In contrast, in Port Talbot we see a £500-million UK Government investment leading to the direct loss of 2,800 jobs. That is a transition of a sort, I suppose, but it does not come anywhere close to meeting the needs of the communities there, the economy or the planet.

Finally, I say as gently as I can to those on the Labour Front Bench that if decarbonisation is not to mean deindustrialisation, they should please have a word with their leader and make sure that he does not water down any further his £28 billion pledge, because communities that depend on our getting the transition right, such as mine, deserve and expect no less.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To resume her seat no later than 6.44 pm, I call Ruth Jones.

6.41 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is good to participate in this debate, but it is not good to recognise the thousands of job losses coming down the track and the devastating effect that will have on our local communities. We cannot underestimate the anxiety and anguish caused by this callous announcement by Tata, and the lack of thought by the UK Government in just going along with it. It is not just about the direct job losses, but about the thousands of other workers and families involved in the supply chain of the steelworks in south Wales.

This announcement is a massive blow for everyone across Wales and the UK. It is all the more frustrating, because we know that this decision to shed 2,800 jobs is completely avoidable. We know that the steel industry has to decarbonise, and we must achieve our goal of net zero, but we do not have to do it overnight. We can transition to green steel. Decarbonisation cannot mean deindustrialisation. The route to green steel involves a mix of all the available technologies, not just electric arc furnaces. We will move towards our goal of net zero, but in partnership and co-operation, leaving no one behind. That is the fair way; that is Labour's way.

In contrast, this Government are so deaf to the problem that the Prime Minister would not even answer the phone to the First Minister Mark Drakeford when he rang to discuss the proposed job losses. That tells us volumes about how ready to listen this Government are. As we are talking about Government responses, will the Minister meet the unions? I believe that the last meeting was way back in May 2023. It would be good to have a commitment from the Minister.

There is also a knock-on effect, because while we are mainly concerned with jobs in Port Talbot today, there will be an impact on its sister site Llanwern in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). Many people in Newport West work in Llanwern, and let us not forget the other steel companies, such as Island Steel and Sims Metal recycling, which are also suffering because of a lack of coherence and strategy from the current UK Government. It is unbelievable.

Like all the speakers on the Labour Benches, I pay tribute to the union representatives here in the Public Gallery today, and I thank them for their diligent and proactive work. I call on the UK Government to engage with them and work with Tata to ensure that the UK

retains its steel production capabilities and that our automotive, defence, manufacturing, construction and renewables industries can procure and use our own British steel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To start the wind-ups, I call the Opposition spokesperson.

6.43 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): This has been a powerful debate, reflecting the huge strength of feeling in this place, but also the huge knowledge and ambition for our steel industry. I was disappointed that the Minister came to this place and said that this debate was performative, less than a week after Tata Steel announced nearly 3,000 job losses. I think we all would have expected better from her.

Like many others, this afternoon I met steelworkers and union officials not only from Port Talbot, but from all the other steel sectors and steel sites across the country. They have come because they know what this announcement means for them and their future. These actions will have consequences beyond last week's announcement. The steelworkers here today, like many of us, are baffled by the Government's approach. They know that steel is a foundation industry. They know how crucial it is to our economy. They know that the world is uncertain—for goodness' sake, the Prime Minister was here only this afternoon talking about strikes on Houthis in Yemen—and that having our own supply of primary steel is crucial to our security. Our genuine question is: why are the Government so content to be spending half a billion pounds on a scheme that leads to thousands of job losses?

Stephen Kinnock: On jobs, my hon. Friend will have seen that every steel industry across the G20 and around the planet is going through massive change, but the only place where there is a threat of thousands of job losses is the United Kingdom. Why does she think that might be?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He made a brilliant speech earlier and has been a great defender of his constituents. The lack of any plan from the Government over the last 14 years is at the heart of the problems we see today.

As the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), said in his opening speech, we also risk something much wider: that net zero becomes a zero-sum game for working people and we lose the public consent that we need for the transition. There is no getting away from the facts. The Government have pushed a plan that uses hundreds of millions of pounds to make thousands of people redundant. If Scunthorpe ends up going the same way—the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) made a powerful speech to the contrary—we will be unable to produce primary steel in the UK.

In the Port Talbot plan, the two blast furnaces will shut this year, with a cliff edge for jobs. For at least three years, steel will be completely imported from India and the Netherlands to feed Trostre and Llanwern in south Wales, but there is no guarantee that once the electric arc furnace is built, those jobs will stay. We know that there are huge questions about scrap steel and whether it will produce the steel we need. Many Members, including the Chair of the Business and

[Sarah Jones]

Trade Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), asked questions to which the Government have so far provided no answers.

Alun Cairns: I did not have an opportunity to develop this in my speech, but would the hon. Lady and the Labour party support a development corporation to diversify the economy so that it is not so dependent on one industry and one company?

Sarah Jones: The Labour party would support an industrial strategy, which would have myriad plans that would look exactly at some of these issues. Our national wealth fund would fund some of the really important future industries that we need, crowd-in private sector investment at a much greater scale and, hopefully, lead to the manufacturing industry growing and not the managed decline we have seen under this Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said that the plan is exporting jobs and importing carbon, and he is exactly right. My dad was from Llanelli, once the tinplate capital of the world. My grandad worked at the tinplate factory that was then called Richard Thomas and Baldwins, and his brother worked at the Salter saucepan works. They would have stood in Stradey Park singing “Sosban Fach,” I am sure bursting with pride.

Britain’s steel industry has seen us through momentous periods in Britain’s national story—the white heat of the industrial revolution; the planes, ships and tanks that saw us through the second world war; and the buildings dotting our skyline across this modern Britain—but if we get nostalgic for the past, we do not look to the future. The world is changing, it is less safe and less secure, and steel is changing. New technologies are transforming how we make and use steel, and it will be as crucial to our future as it has been to our past.

We cannot make solar power without steel. We cannot make electric vehicles without steel. We cannot make wind turbines without steel. We will not reach the Paris climate agreement targets without steel. Steel is used for 3D printing and robotic automation, and everything from the tools that our doctors use to save our lives to the rocket ships that reach into space needs steel. Our pens are made of steel, and Big Ben ticks because of steel. Anyone who does not know that it is magic should read Ed Conway’s book “Material World”. Steel makes the machines, the tools and the factories that make everything possible. It will forge our future, not just our past. The debate is not about nostalgia: it is about looking head. Labour Members know that steel can have a bright future in Britain.

The Government’s last-minute chaotic deal is a masterclass in how not to run the transition. What they offered was never a serious plan for the long-term of our steel industry; it was yet another sticking plaster from a Government lurching from crisis to crisis, unable or unwilling to take a long-term view.

There are other ways forward. Labour has a cast-iron commitment to support our steel industry. We have earmarked up to £3 billion for investment in green steel alongside industry, working with steel communities to ensure that the transition comes with jobs. There are other ways forward that can help us, not least hydrogen.

While the Conservatives scramble around for last-minute deals, Labour will make long-term investments. That is the central difference in our approach.

We must think about manufacturing differently. I have lost track of the number of times businesses have said to me, “We would invest in renewables, but the Government make it too hard.” Our manufacturers say, “We want to decarbonise, but we are living hand to mouth because our energy bills are so much higher than in other countries, and Government won’t help us.” This steel debacle speaks to a much wider issue. We do not just need a steel industry: we need glass, ceramics, cement, compost, critical minerals, batteries, composites and cheap energy. We need supply chains that work, an upgraded national grid, planning reform and a job plan to create jobs across every part of this country—a transition from the old to a much cheaper renewable future. In short, we need an industrial strategy. We need a Government who believe in working in partnership with industry, not just telling them to “F off”, and we need a plan that looks to the future of our own country and does not just rely on cheap imports from China.

We are asking the Government to think again, to look at the multi-union plan again and to think about how to defend primary steel capacity in our country. We know that steelworkers are watching this debate, and they must feel wretched. I ask Government Members in all sincerity: are they concerned about our defence capabilities if we lose the capacity to make primary steel? Do they really think the Government’s plan is money well spent? Should decarbonisation really be about cutting jobs? Is manufacturing really a Victorian pursuit best left to the Chinese, as a former Tory Prime Minister is reported as saying?

Or, as the great country that we are, can we harness the skills and talents of our people and create a vibrant manufacturing sector here in the UK? Tonight, can we send a message to the steelworkers here that we want to protect the future of British steelmaking, and that we will not sit by and let managed decline be the hallmark of this great British industry? I commend the motion to the House.

6.51 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): I thank the hon. Lady and all those who took part in the debate. I say very clearly that I completely understand how devastating the news is. I understand the devastation that people will feel in Port Talbot—the whole community, but especially those people who face the loss of their jobs and those in the wider supply chain. There will be a wider impact—no one is denying that or running away from that.

Let me set out the situation that the Government found themselves in. Throughout the debate, Members have tried to suggest that this is a Government decision. It is not a Government decision. It is not the Government who decided to close—

Mr Khalid Mahmood *rose—*

Stephen Kinnock *rose—*

David T. C. Davies: Let me make a little progress, as I only have about six minutes and I think Members will want me to put things on the record. The hon. Member

for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) waved around the Syndex plan; as a member of Unite, surely he will be aware that it rejected that plan.

Let me go back to the situation we found ourselves in. It was not a decision of the Government to shut down the blast furnace, but one taken by Tata in the light of the losses it was making.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. Yes, it is a Tata decision, but £500 million of British taxpayers' money is going into it. Will he set out what red lines the Government put down around that £500 million? Were there any red lines around jobs?

David T. C. Davies: It came down to this: the Government had to find a solution that was acceptable to Tata and that would save the maximum number of jobs. The Government are not paying £500 million to throw 3,000 people out of work—[*Interruption.*] No, the Government are paying £500 million to save 5,000 jobs, because they will be saved, as well as around 12,500 jobs in the supply chain.

Stephen Kinnock *rose—*

David T. C. Davies: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman in a moment, because he knows more about this than many who have spoken. The reality is that Tata told us that it was looking to pull out completely from the United Kingdom. If the loss of 3,000 jobs is devastating—it certainly is—how much more devastating would 5,000 be, and 12,500 jobs in the supply chain? It was a simple choice for the Government—not a good one—between seeing 3,000 people lose their jobs or around 17,500 people lose their jobs, and possibly even more. That is why the Government committed to pay £500 million towards an arc furnace. Let me make one other thing clear: the Government will not pay a penny to Tata until that arc furnace is built¹.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way again; he is being generous. I think there are many reasons why Tata would not be considering full closure, not least the multibillion cost of closing down the Port Talbot steelworks. The remediation costs would be absolutely astronomical, so that was never on the table. The choice was between the bad deal that the Government have done with Tata and the compelling multi-union deal. Can we please just have the facts on the table, which are that this is not about closing the plant versus the Government's deal, but about the multi-union deal being the right way forward?

David T. C. Davies: I understand the hon. Gentleman's position and he is right to stand up for his workers. This is the reality of the situation: that plan has not persuaded Tata. Tata has not said that it is credible. Tata has said to me that it could not go along with that plan, because although one of the blast furnaces—blast furnace No. 4—has a number of years to run, it would still come to the end of the life of the coke plant and the sintering plant, so if Tata went ahead with that proposal, it would keep open one blast furnace, which is still losing a lot of money, and then have to start importing all the coke and all the sinter that it would need for it.

1. [*Official Report*, 1 February 2024, Vol. 744, c. 13MC.]

There is then the technical problem in that Tata says it would be very difficult indeed to build an arc furnace next to a working blast furnace containing molten steel. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman can shake his head, but that is what it is saying to us. That is what it has said to us as a Government and that is why we find ourselves in the difficult, unpleasant and awful situation of having to choose between 3,000 people losing their jobs and 17,500 people losing their jobs.¹ That is why we came to the decision we did.

Stephen Kinnock *rose—*

David T. C. Davies: May I just continue, because I have only three minutes left?

I want to say something about those 3,000 people. I worked in a steel plant myself. I worked in Llanwern when I left school, so I am directly involved in this and I feel it. I say to the workers that I have met the trade unions on a number of occasions. In fact, I will cancel what I am supposed to be doing next and I will go out there in the Public Gallery and meet the workers, with the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and anyone from the unions, to explain the Government's commitment.

There is £100 million on top of the £500 million, which will be there for the community in Port Talbot. It will be there to develop infrastructure to get other companies in. But the most important thing, and the hon. Gentleman knows that I have said this in the transition board meetings, is to ensure that anyone and everyone who loses their job has the absolute maximum opportunity to retrain and do anything that they want to do as far as retraining is concerned—to help to set people up in businesses, to get them licences, to get them any training they want. There is a massive commitment from the UK Government to that and we will not turn our backs on the people of Port Talbot.

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend is making an extremely powerful and factual case, rather than some of the wilder claims that have been made. Bearing in mind that this is a devolved responsibility, is he aware of any capital sums that the Welsh Government are making available to support the community?

David T. C. Davies: The Welsh Government have made it clear that they are not able at the moment to put in the sort of money that would be needed to come up with any kind of different plan. There is no other plan on the table, which is why we find ourselves in the situation we are in.

I will turn very quickly to a couple of points that were made. First, on primary or virgin steel, obviously all the iron ore and coal used in the plant is being imported. We are, therefore, at this moment, dependent on other countries for our virgin steel capacity. The advantage of an arc furnace, although this is not the situation that I want to be in, is that we would not be dependent on foreign countries for the supply of steel because, as the Minister for Industry and Economic Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) pointed out, we currently export 8 million tonnes.

Holly Mumby-Croft: Will the Minister give way?

1. [*Official Report*, 1 February 2024, Vol. 744, c. 14MC.] (*Correction*)

David T. C. Davies: I think I had better keep going because I have one minute left.

On defence, none of the steel being produced in Port Talbot is going into the defence industry. The defence industry uses steel from Sheffield Forgemasters, which is created by an electric arc furnace. There is an issue, historically, with the quality of the steel that comes out of an arc furnace, but all the experts have told me that it is getting better and better all the time. Tata expects an electric arc furnace to be able to supply about 90% of the products that it currently supplies through the blast furnace.

Exciting technology is being developed that uses hydrogen instead of coal or coke to reduce iron, but there is only one plant doing it, at Luleå in Sweden. It is completely experimental at the moment. There is a podcast on the BBC in which the chief executive being interviewed makes it clear that it is 25% more expensive than the steel produced in a convention blast furnace. So good luck trying to persuade Tata that it should get rid of producing steel in the usual fashion and replace it with something that is 25% more expensive. The reality is—

Sir Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab) *rose—*

David T. C. Davies: I know my time is up, but the plan that Labour Members have waved around has not been put to Tata by the Labour party.

Sir Alan Campbell *claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).*

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 223, Noes 0.

Division No. 64]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Byrne, Ian
Abrahams, Debbie	Byrne, rh Liam
Ali, Rushanara	Cadbury, Ruth
Ali, Tahir	Callaghan, Amy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Amesbury, Mike	Campbell, Mr Gregory
Anderson, Fleur	Carden, Dan
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Barker, Paula	Chamberlain, Wendy
Beckett, rh Dame Margaret	Champion, Sarah
Begum, Apsana	Chapman, Douglas
Benn, rh Hilary	Cherry, Joanna
Betts, Mr Clive	Cooper, Daisy
Black, Mhairi	Cooper, rh Yvette
Blackford, rh Ian	Cowan, Ronnie
Blackman, Kirsty	Crawley, Angela (<i>Proxy vote cast by Owen Thompson</i>)
Blake, Olivia	Creasy, Stella
Blomfield, Paul	Cryer, John
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cummins, Judith
Brennan, Kevin	Cunningham, Alex
Brock, Deidre	Daby, Janet
Brown, Alan	Dalton, Ashley
Brown, Ms Lyn	Davey, rh Ed
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	David, Wayne
Burgon, Richard	Davies-Jones, Alex
Butler, Dawn	Day, Martyn

De Cordova, Marsha	Leadbeater, Kim
Dixon, Samantha	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Lewis, Clive
Dodds, Anneliese	Linden, David
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Dorans, Allan (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)	Lucas, Caroline
Doughty, Stephen	Madders, Justin
Dowd, Peter	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Duffield, Rosie	Malhotra, Seema
Dyke, Sarah	Maskell, Rachael
Eastwood, Colum	Mc Nally, John
Edwards, Jonathan	McCabe, Steve
Edwards, Sarah	McCarthy, Kerry
Efford, Clive	McDonald, Andy (<i>Proxy vote cast by Ian Lavery</i>)
Elliott, Julie	McDonald, Stuart C.
Elmore, Chris	McDonnell, rh John
Eshalomi, Florence	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Evans, Chris	McGovern, Alison
Farry, Stephen	McKinnell, Catherine
Fellows, Marion	McMahon, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen	McMorris, Anna
Flynn, Stephen	Miliband, rh Edward
Fovargue, Yvonne	Mishra, Navendu
Foy, Mary Kelly	Monaghan, Carol
Furniss, Gill	Moran, Layla
Gardiner, Barry	Morden, Jessica
Gibson, Patricia	Morgan, Helen
Gill, Preet Kaur	Morgan, Stephen
Girvan, Paul	Morris, Grahame
Glindon, Mary	Murray, Ian
Grady, Patrick	Murray, James
Green, Sarah	Nandy, Lisa
Greenwood, Lilian	Newlands, Gavin
Greenwood, Margaret	Nichols, Charlotte
Griffith, Dame Nia	Nicolson, John (<i>Proxy vote cast by Marion Fellows</i>)
Gwynne, Andrew	Norris, Alex
Haigh, Louise	O'Hara, Brendan
Hamilton, Fabian	Olney, Sarah
Hamilton, Mrs Paulette	Onwurah, Chi
Hanna, Claire	Oppong-Asare, Abena
Hardy, Emma	Osamor, Kate
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Oswald, Kirsten
Harris, Carolyn	Owatemi, Taiwo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Hayes, Helen	Owen, Sarah
Healey, rh John	Pennycook, Matthew
Hendry, Drew	Phillips, Jess
Hillier, Dame Meg	Phillipson, Bridget
Hobhouse, Wera	Pollard, Luke
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret	Powell, Lucy
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Qureshi, Yasmin
Hollern, Kate	Rayner, rh Angela
Hopkins, Rachel	Reed, Steve
Hosie, rh Stewart	Rees, Christina
Howarth, rh Sir George	Reeves, rh Rachel
Huq, Dr Rupa	Reynolds, Jonathan
Hussain, Imran	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Jardine, Christine	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Jarvis, Dan	Robinson, Gavin
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Rodda, Matt
Johnson, Kim	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Jones, Gerald	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Shah, Naz
Jones, Ruth	Shanks, Michael
Jones, Sarah	Shannon, Jim
Kane, Mike	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Kendall, Liz	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Khan, Afzal	Siddiq, Tulip
Kinnock, Stephen	Slaughter, Andy
Lake, Ben	Smith, Alyn
Lavery, Ian	
Law, Chris	

Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tarry, Sam
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Richard
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen

Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa (*Proxy
 vote cast by Marion
 Fellows*)
 Whitley, Mick
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, Hywel
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Jeff Smith and
 Christian Wakeford

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
 Holly Lynch and

Andrew Western

Question accordingly agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 3 to 5 together.

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

SANCTIONS

That the Iran (Sanctions) Regulations 2023 (SI, 2023, No. 1314), dated 11 December 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 13 December 2023, be approved.

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2023 (SI, 2023, No. 1367), dated 12 December 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 14 December 2023, be approved.

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) (Amendment) (No. 4) Regulations 2023 (SI, 2023, No. 1364), dated 12 December 2023, a copy of which was laid before this House on 14 December 2023, be approved.—(*Joy Morrissey.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

Standing Charges on Energy Bills

7.12 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): At a time of soaring energy costs and a cost of living crisis, there is no doubt that high standing charges are a major burden for many, and particularly for low energy users, who have less ability to reduce their bills by reducing energy consumption.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that in a time of soaring energy costs and a crisis in the cost of living, the high standing charges imposed by utility companies represent a significant burden on household finances; further that Scottish households bear some of the highest electricity standing charges in the UK, with households in Linlithgow and East Falkirk currently paying 62.1p per day on direct debit, and 69.2p per day on standard credit; and notes that the result of high standing charges is that lower energy users can save proportionally less money by reducing usage, thus disempowering these households and offering no incentive to reduce energy usage at a time when energy efficiency and environmental sustainability is so vital.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider abolishing standing charges, to alleviate the financial pressure upon households in the cost of living crisis, and to encourage responsible energy use for the good of our planet.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002894]

Local Businesses and the Closure of the Botley Road in Oxford

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Network Rail's closure of Botley Road is having a significant and detrimental impact on local businesses, with some owners experiencing an up to 60% drop in income. My constituents are extremely concerned for these cherished small businesses, with 437 people signing this petition.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Oxford West and Abingdon,

Declares that the closure of Botley Road due to ongoing works at Oxford Rail Station is having a significant and detrimental effect on local businesses; notes that local business owners report they are experiencing up to 60% drop in income; further notes the vital contribution of small businesses to the UK economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure local businesses are able to access a Business Support Fund during the extended closure of Botley Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002902]

Revised National Planning Framework

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Joy Morrissey.)

7.15 pm

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I am grateful for having secured this debate, and even more grateful that the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety is here to respond. In December, the Government announced significant changes to their house building planning policy, giving new powers and freedoms to local planning authorities, such as mine in Basingstoke and Deane, through changes to the national planning policy framework to vary their planned house building numbers away from the standard method, among other things. The Secretary of State rightfully attached to these new powers and freedoms a single, clear and unambiguous condition:

“With these changes secure, there is now an added responsibility on local government to deliver.”

That responsibility on local planning authorities to deliver at their own plans is what I will focus on today. For too many years, some planning authorities have relied on Government for their house building figures, choosing the path of least resistance and doing what the standard formula told them, in the absence of having asked council officials to collect evidence, or perhaps for fear of being challenged if they actually challenged the standard method and had to allocate more people to their planning departments. However, those days are over. Just a month after these significant changes, many local authorities will still be digesting what they mean for them. I hope that this debate and the Minister’s response will help to explain the breadth of these new freedoms to challenge and the new responsibilities that local authorities have.

My local authority, Basingstoke and Deane, published papers to approve its updated local plan, with new planned levels of house building, for public consultation on exactly the same day as the Government’s new policy changes. I am sure that behind the scenes officials and elected councillors will be agreeing how their proposals need to change in the light of the Government’s new policies, which so readily could deal with the concerns about high levels of house building expressed by thousands of my constituents. At this point, let me pay particular tribute to the residents’ groups in my constituency, particularly Clean Air Green Environment, or CAGE; and Save Our Lodden Valley Environment, or SOLVE. They have worked so hard to make the case to cut house building in our borough over many years. These new Government policies are a powerful tool to help achieve that aim.

The Secretary of State’s statement makes it clear that the extensive changes that have been made to the NPPF must be taken into account by the planning inspectors. Of course, all the changes apply to all of the country, but certain changes are more important to certain local authorities. For Basingstoke, which, as the Minister knows, has built homes for more than 150,000 people since 1960, the most relevant change is the one to the standard assessment model—the formula used to determine house building rates. It is now an advisory starting point, not a mandatory end point.

In places such as Basingstoke, where we have a unique set of factors, the standard method has generated house building numbers in the past that are both inappropriate and unachievable. As a result of the changes that the Minister introduced, the local authority is now able to consider varying more widely from that standard assessment, having looked at “exceptional circumstances”, to ensure that house building in our community better reflects the nuance of our individual situation.

I have been campaigning since I was first elected—I think you can remember that, Mr Deputy Speaker—for house building that reflects local need, not a formula. I did so when I called for “No more tower blocks and gridlock” in the 2005 election; in my first Westminster Hall debate; and when working with local environmental groups and residents’ groups. It is what we advocated for at the last planning inspector’s review of our current local plan. It has also been the subject of a recent petition presented to the local authority, which is supported by thousands of residents. We want to see house building levels cut to reflect our local need, not a standard method formulated in Whitehall.

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Local authorities are best placed to ensure that the right homes are built in the right places, so does the right hon. Lady agree that we need to protect the voice of local communities in the planning process?

Dame Maria Miller: It is as if the hon. Lady has read what I am about to say—she is completely right. Cutting house building in Basingstoke will better reflect the situation we have in our community, and that is what my residents want to see, not those numbers continuing to be set from Whitehall.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The right hon. Lady has outlined the way house building impacts her constituency, but does she agree that while planning policy must protect and enhance our environment, it must also focus on the needs of an area? Planners must give material consideration and weighted concern to economic development and job creation.

Dame Maria Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Each of those considerations is different in our individual constituencies, so rather than taking a sledgehammer and telling each of our local authorities how many houses to build, they should reflect the nuance that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

As the Secretary of State set out when he announced the changes to the national planning policy framework, it is for local authorities and their councillors to use the new powers. In Basingstoke’s case, that means Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council and our councillors. They have to take responsibility for using the new NPPF. They have the new powers to use and they understand the pressures that have been put on services, especially the NHS, by exceptionally high volumes of house building in Basingstoke. Councillors must use the new powers to cut house building, at least until the NHS has caught up and, I would argue, until they find a way to further increase the capacity of our roads, which is technically very difficult.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The right hon. Lady is talking about services that support communities in the Basingstoke area. On her point

about building resilient communities, the NPPF was somewhat lacking when it defined such services in rather old-fashioned terms, such as community halls, schools and churches. They are important, but does she agree that we need to bring that up to date to reflect such things as good broadband and fibre to the premises?

Dame Maria Miller: I am sure the hon. Gentleman's point has been heard loud and clear by the Minister. He is right that those are essential services on which all our residents now rely.

The updated NPPF deliberately does not provide an exhaustive list of the applicable exceptional circumstances. The NPPF now shows that exceptional circumstances are not to be drawn narrowly, which was too often asserted in the past by local authorities who readily chose to interpret them from case law alone. It is now clear that local authorities, including mine in Basingstoke, are able to set out their case for exceptional circumstances for a large number of reasons.

In Basingstoke, that could be the age demographics of our town. We are the most rapidly ageing population in Hampshire, with the number of over-65s growing by 77% in the last decade. The primary and most compelling factor that makes Basingstoke and Deane an outlier is our extraordinary levels of historic house building. At the start of the second world war, our population was just 13,000. By 1961, it had grown to 25,000. Today, our population is 186,000, so we have grown from 13,000 to 186,000 in less than a lifetime. Put another way, our population is now almost 1,500 times greater than it was in the second world war. Those are exceptional circumstances that have a clear bearing on the capacity of my community to absorb future high levels of house building.

Not only is such accelerated house building affecting our natural environment, especially our unique and irreplaceable north-flowing salmonoid chalk stream; it is also putting an unsustainable strain on public services, particularly our local roads and the NHS. The Government have invested record sums in my community, but we are fast feeling maxed out. There is to be a brand-new hospital, but not until 2032, and £60 million is expected on road improvements, but there is now no additional capacity technically possible.

Residents are clear about this. Thousands want to cut house building levels. They are living in a constant building site with more than 1,000 new homes being built every year, green space disappearing every day, and road works trying to squeeze the last ounce of capacity out of every road and junction. Enough is enough. Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council published its local plan, which clings to the now outdated policy of standard method as its end point, as if it continued to be set in stone. As a result, the draft plan fails to slow down house building, ratchets up building rates over time to dizzying levels and completely fails to reflect our exceptional circumstances, which I have just outlined.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. People also have to live in those communities and be entertained. Does she agree that music venues are enormously important for the cultural talent pipeline? The agent of change principle sought to protect those venues from neighbouring development.

That is why it was incorporated into the planning policy guidance. Does she therefore agree that this now needs to be enshrined in law to strengthen the protection for music venues and for our musicians of the future?

Dame Maria Miller: The right hon. Gentleman may not know this, but I am the mother of two musicians and I would have to agree with him—for fear of the consequences if I did not. I hope that the Minister has listened to him as well, as he makes a valid point.

I know from conversations that I have had on the doorsteps in Basingstoke for many years that excessive house building is the No. 1 issue for many residents. It is so disappointing that the borough council has not yet exercised its new powers, especially given all the hard work that the Minister has put into changing the NPPF to better accommodate places with exceptional circumstances, such as Basingstoke.

Some of my councillors have supported a short-term approach, bagging the reduction in the five-year land supply to four years, but surely they should also share my concern that they could easily see further manipulation of developments being carried forward to make that apparent gain evaporate quite quickly. What we need is the long-term solution, not a quick fix.

None the less, I am an optimist. Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council started its public consultation on 22 January and it will run until 4 March, so that residents who are interested in the local plan and in house building levels can take part, and also perhaps support my petition at the same time, calling on the council to use its new powers to make the case for cutting house building levels to the planning inspector. Nothing is guaranteed; that is obvious. Evidence must be presented, and the case—the case that is right for the community—also has to be made. And what is right for the community is certainly not continuing house building at the current level.

I hope to embolden Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council to make changes. I hope the Minister can answer a couple of questions to help them on their way. First, will the planning inspector be expecting new interpretations of “exceptional circumstance” following the recent changes to the NPPF? Too often in the past I have been told that it applies only to the greenbelt. My reading is that that is no longer the case. Does he expect every local authority to at least acknowledge the new NPPF policies in their local plan? And would he share the surprise of local residents if any local authority were to completely ignore the new NPPF policies and act as if no changes had been made at all?

Nothing is more important to me than ensuring that everyone in my constituency has a place to live in—an affordable home. It is the Conservatives who have made sure that, in my constituency, affordable homes make up 40% of all new homes. However, Basingstoke has for decades been making up for the lack of house building elsewhere—in London, throughout the south-east and beyond. The Government changes to the NPPF mean that now our local planning authority, Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, can take responsibility for ensuring that its house building plans reflect the exceptional circumstances that I have outlined in Basingstoke, and indeed in neighbouring Oakley and other surrounding villages, where the vast majority of house building has taken place. The council must look again at its plans,

[*Dame Maria Miller*]

which were drawn up before these important new Government policies were launched, and do what is right. I believe what is right is to cut house building to a level that is appropriate for our community, taking into account the sort of nuanced circumstances that the Secretary of State talked about when he launched those new policies.

7.30 pm

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (*Dame Maria Miller*) for securing the debate and for the excellent speech she just delivered on behalf of her constituents. She clearly stands up for her constituents, and I know they will have been listening tonight.

I know housing and planning is an important issue for the people of Basingstoke and, indeed, many people across the country. That is exactly why we took to update the national planning policy framework just before Christmas. This Government want to build more homes, but we want to build them in the right places. We want to build them more quickly, beautifully and sustainably. The right way to deliver that is through a reformed planning system that works. We are clear that it is only through up-to-date local plans that local authorities can deliver for communities, protect the land and assets that matter, and create the conditions for more homes to be delivered all across the country.

As the House knows, we consulted last year on a series of proposals and received more than 26,000 responses, demonstrating the interest in planning to so many communities up and down the land. The resulting update of the framework builds on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 and delivers on the intent set out by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities last year. It does so in a way that seeks to promote building the right homes in the right places with the right infrastructure, which will ensure that the environment is protected and will give local people a greater say on where, and where not, to place development.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way and congratulate the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (*Dame Maria Miller*) on securing the debate.

On the issue of a local say, will the Minister expand slightly on the placement of things like solar farms? It is the wild west. In places such as Oxfordshire, we have a number of solar farms coming forward, including possibly the largest one in Europe at Botley West. For those that are over 50 MW, it does not feel like local say has anything to do with it. Did he consider that when the Government were creating this policy?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments. Many colleagues in the House will have experienced solar farms, both on a constituency basis and from a national policy consideration. There is obviously a trade-off to be made here. The Liberal Democrats are extremely keen on renewable energy, as we all are, and there are implications to that. She is right to highlight that this has to be considered within the appropriate boundaries of the individual areas. That is

exactly why the Government amended the national planning policy framework and exactly why the Conservatives are seeking to establish that balance. We will continue to try to ensure that that balance works for communities, while also getting us the energy we need, so that when we switch on the lights in the morning, they work.

As I said, we consulted on a series of proposals last year and received more than 26,000 responses. That demonstrates the importance of planning for local communities. I understand the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke that Basingstoke and Deane district council has seen a high level of housing delivery, including in recent years, in excess of that set out in the adopted local plan in 2016. Indeed, the housing delivery test results for 2022, published in December, show that the district has delivered more homes than is required through the test. As my right hon. Friend outlined in her excellent speech, a number of measures were announced in the national planning policy framework update, and I hope to highlight a number of those that may assist the district council and other local councils bringing forward their local plans.

First, as my right hon. Friend indicated, we have been consistently clear that the standard method is a starting point for local authorities in assessing what to plan for and that it does not set a mandatory target. The framework now sets that out in national policy. Local authorities should be in no doubt that the outcome of the standard method is an advisory starting point for establishing housing requirements through plan-making. Again, for the avoidance of doubt, that means that local authorities can put forward their own approach to assessing needs where certain exceptional circumstances exist.

Dame Maria Miller: Can my hon. Friend confirm that there will be more types of exceptional circumstances put forward in the future than there have been in the past?

Lee Rowley: I am absolutely certain that there will be more cases for exceptional circumstances put forward in the future, and I encourage councils to consider them if they believe that they apply. Logically, I would then expect more cases for exceptional circumstances to be accepted by the Planning Inspectorate, although that will also be for the inspectorate to determine on a case-by-case basis. It is the Government's intention to indicate that cases for exceptional circumstances can be made, that local authorities should weigh up making them and that, if they feel that they have a strong case through the Planning Inspectorate process, they do so for the good of the communities they seek to serve.

Secondly, the revised NPPF now sets out that there may be situations where higher urban densities would be wholly out of character with the existing area, and that that could be a strong reason why significantly uplifting densities would be inappropriate. Thirdly, our changes to the five-year housing land supply policy mean that up-to-date local plans should no longer have to demonstrate a five-year housing land supply. My right hon. Friend has articulated some of that already, and the considerations going on within her Hampshire constituency, but there is additional flexibility where local authorities are doing the right thing in getting their plans in place and making sure they are retained.

As someone representing a constituency that has suffered from planning issues over many decades, I recognise there is always difficulty around planning in individual local areas. I understand that, and it is one of the reasons why I am so keen to send a message that, while we are clear that we need more houses in this country—we absolutely do—they have to go in the right places. It would be incorrect, wrong and irresponsible of us to say “no more housing” when we need people to get on the housing ladder. We value the benefits to our society that a property-owning democracy brings and we celebrate every first-time buyer who gets on the ladder, because that opens up to them the opportunities that gaining and accreting capital provide.

At the same time, however, we have to accept that not every area, every place or every landscape is appropriate for building on. It is the responsibility of local councils to make sure that they are weighing that up properly, getting ahead of what will always be challenging decisions and having the conversations they need to have with local communities at the earliest possible stage.

Once again, I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this debate. She ended with three questions, and I want to touch on those before I conclude.

John Spellar: This is not just a question of housing; it is also about public and private facilities and a community. As I indicated in my intervention on the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Dame Maria Miller), part of that is about entertainment and social areas, particularly music venues, which are still under pressure. I do not expect an answer tonight, but will the Minister take away the issue of enshrining in legislation some strength for local authorities to protect not only local amenities, but the pipeline of talent for our enormously important cultural industries?

Lee Rowley: I will certainly take that point away, but I hope the right hon. Gentleman will accept that there always a balance about what to put in primary legislation. The law cannot mandate virtue, and we have to find ways to ensure that our statute book does not get too big and unwieldy—there is an argument that we are already heading in that direction after 30, 40 or 50 years of incessant legislating. However, I recognise the important point he makes and I will certainly give it further consideration, although I hope he hears my reticence to state automatically that legislation is always required in all cases.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke asked three questions at the end of her speech. I hope that I have covered the question of exceptional circumstances to some extent. It is absolutely the case that local authorities should put such cases forward where reasonable and proportionate, and where they have a clear case. I would expect more exceptional

circumstance cases to be made, and it is for the Planning Inspectorate to determine their outcome based on the merits or otherwise of their individual circumstances.

Dame Maria Miller: On that point about exceptional circumstances, many local authorities appear to be concerned that pleading exceptional circumstances will land them with a big legal bill and that they will be challenged in the courts. Can the Minister give some comfort to those authorities that such cases will be looked upon by planning inspectors as something that they expect?

Lee Rowley: My right hon. Friend highlights a continuing challenge with the local plan-making process where other actors have issues and considerations. The planning system will never be perfect and give everybody the outcome that they want, but it is important that local planning authorities representing their local areas have the ability to fully consider the importance of planning for their local area and to put forward their arguments in good faith, whether about exceptional circumstances or just through the conventional process, and have them discussed in interactions with the Planning Inspectorate on behalf of the Secretary of State. I encourage them to do so. Although the issue my right hon. Friend raises is not a new one, that should not retard the ability of people, organisations, councils and planning authorities to have the debates and discussions that they need to with local communities and the planning inspector.

On the second question, we absolutely expect local authorities to take into account the NPPF. It has been clear that the NPPF is extant from the moment that it was put in place. There are transitional arrangements for some elements of it at the end, but it is for local authorities to take that into account. I would be surprised if local authorities were not doing that, because the whole purpose of how they approach plans is to recognise transitional arrangements and the fact that different local authorities will be in different places and will have to work out precisely how to consider them. It is vital that local authorities take note of the national planning policy framework and the update that has been made.

I know that planning is hugely important for local communities. My right hon. Friend has articulated in great detail the particular issues in Basingstoke. Indeed, as constituency MPs, we all have such individual circumstances. She is absolutely right to raise those points and highlight the changes that have come and the opportunities that they provide. She is right to stand up for her constituents. It is important that we get planning right. Things will never be perfect, but by having these conversations and making changes, I hope that we can make progress as a Government and a country to build more homes, but in the right places.

Question put and agreed to.

7.42 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 23 January 2024

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Girlguiding UK: British Overseas Territories

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of Girlguiding UK in the British Overseas Territories.

This is an issue that all of us here have a deep interest in. There are many others who I understood would try to be here, but I understand why they are not—there are always reasons, such as the weather in the past few days. None the less, many others wish to make a contribution. When it came to this debate, many Members took the opportunity to sign the early-day motion when it was down, and it is obvious to me that many people have deep concerns about what is happening.

I give special credit to two ladies in Westminster Hall today: the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) and the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins). They are well aware of the issue and I thank them for coming along; they will make contributions that will greatly add to the debate. I am pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), and in particular the Minister in their places. We know that the Minister is always a dear friend to us all, and we have high expectations of his response. There is absolutely no pressure on him whatsoever, but to be fair to him I think he will realise what we are trying to say, why it is so important and why we believe this debate is crucial.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting this debate and allowing me to speak on the topic, along with others. I declare from the outset that I am not a Girl Guide—that is probably fairly obvious. However, as a scout and a member of the Boys' Brigade many moons ago, I have an affinity with my fellow youth organisations and a desire to speak out for those who, like me, have benefited greatly from being part of such a wonderful organisation and what it does, what it creates and how it can shape young people for the adult life of tomorrow. The fact is that the Girl Guides, Scouts, Girls' Brigade, Boys' Brigade, the Campaigners and many other similar organisations really sow seeds into the lives of young people, promoting teamwork, teaching new skills, and giving children the confidence to be with new people and try things that are out of their comfort zone. That is what they do: they mould, create and challenge. They give an opportunity for insight into what adult life can be like.

I was a proud member of the Boys' Brigade and my boys followed that tradition, which their children now follow as well. I cannot say enough about all that is positive about such organisations. There is a much-loved Girl Guides organisation that has four units in Newtownards, my major town in the Strangford constituency—that is in one town alone—and it is easy to see why. The structure, the care and the wonderful

volunteers make it so appealing to children, and it really is not an exaggeration to say that it makes up the fabric of community life, not simply in towns such as Newtownards and Strangford, but in rural and isolated villages throughout the Strangford constituency, because many parents take their children to the Girl Guides in Newtownards and elsewhere. I have attended many events hosted by the Girl Guides; I remember one in particular when I was the mayor of Ards and North Down Borough Council—it was a long time ago, in 1991 or 1992. I knew some of the leaders of the Girl Guides in Newtownards, and they invited me down. We had a wonderful night with the young girls and what they did that night, along with the leaders as well, so that occasion has always been memorable for me.

When it comes to speaking for the Girl Guides, I am happy to do so, because it really is an organisation that can do great things. I have always been impressed by the level of love and thought put into making the guides relevant and interesting for each new generation of children; it has a positive mindset. However, I was so sad to learn that the decision had been taken to close the Girl Guides in British overseas territories, including our army bases. For that reason, I requested this debate, along with the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North and others, so that we have a chance to discuss it and others have a chance to add their voice, along with mine, in asking the Minister to intervene and make contact with Girlguiding UK to offer support and help to enable the overseas aspect to continue. That really is so vital.

It bears reiterating that British overseas territories are precisely that—British. Others, like me, have a real love of their Britishness. I regularly tell people that I am British, because I believe in it. I love it. I like to tell others that we have something special. As such, there is an expectation that we can partake in things that are quintessentially British, such as being part of the local Rainbow group. It saddens me that the message sent out is that of an inability to work across the difficulties to allow these groups to continue to meet. I understand that there are difficulties, but we should look to the motto “Be prepared”; we should be prepared to go the extra mile to find a way to make it work. I ask the Minister to be prepared and to go that extra mile, as well.

In 2023, there were around 2,600 members of British Girlguiding Overseas in 36 countries and territories. I understand the risks that have arisen with the passage of time and the child protection obligations. Last night, the hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) introduced an Adjournment debate on AI scams. I just relate this story, because it is important; it shows that society has changed and that people can buy into scams and find themselves in difficulties. I made an intervention in that debate about elderly and vulnerable people.

In the days of my youth—you and I are probably of a similar vintage, Mr Chairman, so I suspect that they were the days of your youth as well—we did not lock the back doors. There was no necessity to do that. Life was different then, but life has changed. I understand the difficulties and necessities that have arisen with the passage of time and the child protection obligations. It is really important that we get those right, because society has changed and we have to protect people more than ever. However, those 2,600 members are left without that precious opportunity to be part of something global, something diverse, something useful—something

[Jim Shannon]

that they can appreciate in a community that appreciates them. That is the importance of this issue, and the importance of holding this debate.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member and fully support him in what he seeks to achieve. In June, in the same announcement that Girlguiding made over its desire to sell its centres in overseas territories, it announced that it would sell five centres in the UK including Waddow Hall in Lancashire, where many young people from my communities in Cumbria have enjoyed outdoor learning experiences. The Waddow Hall Trust is seeking to keep Waddow Hall as an outdoor education centre. Does the hon. Member agree that expanding access to outdoor education for all young people at primary and secondary school could be a real lifeline for centres such as Waddow Hall?

Jim Shannon: Yes, I agree. We need some extra thinking about how we move forward and how we retain—or better use—some of the centres, and I am sorry to hear about that happening in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. The doors are not closed yet, so hopefully there will be a resolution that can take us forward.

In April 2023, Girlguiding UK announced plans to end British Girlguiding Overseas—the BGO operation. The trust said that its decision reflected the challenges and risks of running organisations across those different regions. On 1 September 2023, girl guiding in the middle east, Africa, Asia, Benelux, France—European regions—was ended. Girl guiding on military bases ended at the same time. Girlguiding UK said that its girl guiding will continue in the UK's overseas territories for the first few months of 2024—we are in those first few months now—after which a further update will be issued.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. At the end of 2023, I was taken to the Falkland Islands by the Falklands Islands Government. That was paid for by the Falkland Islands Government. One of our meetings was with the Girl Guides themselves. They had been deeply affected and were very worried about the future of their movement.

The Falkland Islands is a wonderful place, but it is very small. It does not have many services for young children. It has a population of only 3,500 people. The Girl Guides provide a key lifeline, social outlet and a hobby for people. They are part of everyday life for the small population of Falkland Islanders. They told me that cutting off the Girl Guides would have a devastating impact on young girls in the Falkland Islands. Does the hon. Gentleman agree, especially when it comes to overseas territories with smaller populations, that we cannot let important organisations such as the Girl Guides go by the wayside, because it will have a huge detrimental effect? Does he also agree that people in the UK's overseas territories are British, and that they should therefore be treated the same as British girls in the UK?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman sums up the core issue of this debate; I thank him for that. I was just about to mention the Falkland Islands, so he has pre-empted my next sentence.

BGO currently operates in nine of the UK's 14 overseas territories: Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, St Helena and Ascension, and the Turks and Caicos Islands. Some of the people sitting in the Gallery are from those overseas territories and are here to add their support through their presence. In August 2023, the executive of the BGO said it had made alternative proposals for Girlguiding UK to continue operations, but these were rejected. It has said:

“We lobbied at the highest level of Girlguiding with a request to become a charity in our own right or to set up as a different charity as a franchise of Girlguiding. These alternatives, amongst many others, were repeatedly rejected by the Board and CEO. In particular, we presented a comprehensive proposal to become a charity in our own right on the same basis as the other regions. Despite the inclusion of a dedicated risk manager, office staff and a detailed risk assessment, this proposal was ultimately rejected by the trustees.”

Some 600 young girls cannot continue on their girl guiding journey, but my role as the Member in charge of the debate is not to throw recrimination or to apportion blame. That is never my way of doing things, because I always like to bring people along, if at all possible. My aim today is to ask what support this House can give our overseas territories and military bases to allow their children to continue their journey and live a fulfilling life. It was highlighted to me in an email that Girlguiding membership is hugely important,

“especially for our Armed Forces families. Young members and adult volunteers whose families were posted to Germany, Cyprus, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Falklands”—

the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) mentioned the Falklands—

“as well as other NATO bases, were able to transfer directly into a unit, making the initial transition to life in a new country a bit easier.”

When someone is taken to live somewhere else overseas, it is so important for them to be able to take some comfort in organisations with which they are familiar. The quote continues:

“Membership of the BGO/Girlguiding gave them an extended family and the support that goes along with that, in sometimes difficult situations. This support continued while their serving family members were on deployment.

That email raises a vital point that reiterates why this issue spans not simply the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, but the Ministry of Defence. Other Government Departments must have input into it as well.

I have also been contacted by a number of people living in the overseas territories to thank me and others for highlighting this issue, which is so important to them. They include Claire Montado, the commissioner of Girlguiding Gibraltar, who said:

“For us, the decision when announced was somewhat surreal. To treat the OTs as if we are not part of the UK is incomprehensible to us”—

it is incomprehensible to me and others in this Chamber as well—

“and does not acknowledge the relationship with the UK or their contribution to Britain over the centuries.”

That Britishness and togetherness is what this debate is about. Ms Montado continues:

“In the case of Gibraltar, we are all born with the right of abode in the UK. Our legal, educational, health systems etc are all UK based. We have even left the EU along with the UK because we are part of the UK.”

That tells us about the uniqueness of Gibraltar. She goes on to say:

“Girlguiding has been in continuous operation in Gibraltar for over 100 years. When the entire civilian population was evacuated (to Ireland, Jamaica, Madeira and London) during WWII to serve Britain and the world’s defence needs, Girlguiding continued in the evacuee camps. We are determined to keep Girlguiding going on the Rock, but it is culturally and geographically for us to do that within the UK umbrella. We are no different to the Crown Dependencies and should not be treated as such.”

I hold that view very close to my heart, which is why today’s debate in Westminster Hall is important. With all respect and humility, that is why we are asking Girlguiding UK and our own ministerial team to have a closer look at this to see how the risk can be managed, spread and dealt with to enable those hundreds of British girls—they are British girls—to be part of what the Girl Guides in my town of Newtownards take for granted. The affinity between the Girl Guide groups in Newtownards in Strangford and those across the world in the overseas territories is so important.

I conclude with this comment. I look forward to hearing what other Members will say, but my focus is on the Minister, and I want not words, but assurances. I say that to him very sincerely, very humbly. I ask that to try to find a solution, because solutions are what life is all about. When people come to me with a problem, they want the solution. Our job as politicians and MPs is to provide solutions. I think that we have solutions today. The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North, who will follow me, and others who make speeches will all say the same thing. Today, there will be a unity of spirit, of thought, of focus, a unity of request to the Minister. I wish to see the action that he will be prepared to take to do all we can to foster this wonderful opportunity for all British girls, not only here at home, but across this wonderful world that we live in, and especially within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the overseas territories. We are all British and we all wish to be British, so let us do our bit for the Girl Guides and the overseas territories.

9.46 am

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on a brilliant opening to the debate. I will start where he finished—with a call for a solution. I know that solutions and suggestions for solutions have come forward from various guiding organisations within the overseas territories, such as setting up separate charities to enable them to continue.

I will start with some comments from the Minister’s opposite number in the Cayman Islands. The hon. Isaac Rankine MP, the Minister for Youth, Sports and Heritage—probably broadly comparable to the Minister present—made the point that Girlguiding Cayman Islands provides structure, guidance and leadership. That is what those in girl guiding in the overseas territories want to continue: the structure, the guidance and the leadership that has come from Girlguiding in the UK. That would allow the organisational structure to be maintained with sound governance and support from the governing body of Girlguiding. That is all that they are calling for: to let that umbrella of support and structure to be maintained. They are prepared to consider new, innovative and different ways to allow that to happen.

The response from those at Girlguiding UK, however, has been frightened. That is the only word I can use: they are frightened of the risk. They talk about risk management and the challenges of different legal structures in the territories, but those legal structures have been different for generations. Those legal structures were governing the territories 100 years ago, long before email existed or people could log on to the Girlguiding intranet to get all the policies around safeguarding that they needed, for example.

Safeguarding is not a new risk, tragically. Looking after the welfare of our young people has to be paramount—of course it does—but we know that there have been those who have not safeguarded children in various organisations across the globe for centuries. We are now much more alive to the risks; we have much better policies in place to manage the risks, and we have safeguarding structures that simply did not exist 100 years ago. I would therefore argue very respectfully to Girlguiding that, although of course it is a challenge to manage structures across the globe and it is not easy in a completely different territory and time zone, we have modern forms of communication that make things a great deal easier than they have ever been.

This may seem a little off track, but I want to talk specifically about Parliament Week, because it is an opportunity for us all to visit youth organisations across our constituencies—schools, Girlguiding, the Scouts or whoever. In the past year, I have taken full advantage of that opportunity, largely because myriad invitations came in from some great organisations, including the regional Girl Guides, the brownies and a whole host of schools. I must not forget that the Scouts invited me, too.

Although the rainbows exist now, the brownies is where it all started for me. I confess that it has been 40 years since I left the brownies with an armful of badges. I was very proud of those badges, including one about the international work of the brownies. As a small child 40 years ago, I learned all about the work of British Girlguiding Overseas, and it has stuck with me to this day. The only other thing that has stuck with me is my first aid badge, which could probably do with a bit of a refresher.

I remember the importance of those badges, and I remember learning about the different brownie and guide uniforms in different territories. As a child, it was incredibly exciting to know that I had something in common with girls all around the world. At the end of Parliament Week last year, I received a whole new collection of brownie badges, of which I am inordinately proud. They were awarded to me for having taken part in Parliament Week with the Nursling and Rownhams brownies and the North Baddesley brownies. I want to highlight what those girls were learning last year, undoubtedly in common with girls around the globe.

I went to the North Baddesley brownies, where the sixes have divided into three groups. They spoke of some of the challenges that different groups are facing, and they did so in an incredibly clever way. The unicorn group spoke about the challenges of gender stereotypes in the 21st century. The mermaid group spoke about the challenges of pollution in the ocean and how that affected mermaids; the climate and pollution challenges were made relevant to the mermaid icon that they had chosen. The ogres group spoke about the challenge of

[Caroline Nokes]

appearance-based bullying. It was all incredibly cleverly done, and it gave those young girls the opportunity to research an issue, think about its impact and then stand up and make a presentation on it.

I do not know whether colleagues in this House are ever struck by this, but I am constantly struck by how scared my constituents sometimes are when they have to get to their feet and speak publicly on any issue. In those brownie groups, seven, eight and nine-year-old girls were being taught to speak with confidence on a range of issues, and to present to an audience not just of their mums, dads and girl guiding leaders, but of me, their local MP. They had the chance to make the case directly to me. That is something that happens around the globe and in our overseas territories at the moment, and we are at risk of losing it. We are at risk of losing the voices of those young girls, who are undoubtedly being given the confidence to go on to contribute in later life.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the right hon. Lady agree that we all need to do as much as we can to promote youth organisations, and particularly uniformed organisations like the Girl Guides, in overseas territories and at home? They promote discipline, respect for genders and the sort of values that are often stereotyped and not reflected on television screens, but which we need to inculcate among our younger generation.

Caroline Nokes: I am exceptionally grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, because it brings me on to one of my other visits during Parliament Week, which was to the regional headquarters of guiding in Salisbury. Having a region that stretches from Cornwall all the way to Hampshire is an interesting challenge, but that is what girl guiding does: it has big regions that manage to communicate effectively with one another. In Salisbury they came together to speak to me, and there were rainbows, guides, brownies and rangers in attendance.

I want to focus on one former Girl Guide who became a Salisbury city councillor: Eleanor Wills, who is now an ambassador and champion for guiding regionally. Eleanor has set up her own badge focusing on community and on giving young women the opportunity to contribute to their community and become community champions. Eleanor did that herself: she went on to become a local councillor and has been a real advocate and champion for young women. That is what guiding does, and I say respectfully that it is what we are lacking on a national and international stage. In democracies, parliaments and assemblies around the globe, we still have far too few women speaking up. Girl guiding has a role to play in making sure that we give girls their voice and encourage them to go forward with it.

Girl guiding sometimes leads to women ending up in this place, but those opportunities are at risk for British girls in our overseas territories. They could potentially be taken away from girls like Chelsea Been, the Turks and Caicos Member of the Youth Parliament. That young lady spoke so eloquently in the Youth Parliament debate on 17 November that she made a significant impact on Mr Speaker in this place: he often talks about

her contribution, and how it is only right and fair that girls like Chelsea be allowed and empowered to continue finding their voices and using them. Her contribution in that debate in November was focused exclusively on what girl guiding had done for her in Turks and Caicos, on the involvement of both her grandmother and her aunt, who was a commissioner there, and on how guiding had given so many girls their voice.

I do not need to highlight this to the Minister, but I will anyway. The joint declaration of Governments of the United Kingdom and British overseas territories was published exactly a month ago today. One month on, we can reflect on that document, which rightly speaks to a modern partnership for a stronger British family. However, it manages to talk about family without using the word “woman” once, and we do make up 50% of that British family. We cannot have the strong, safe and prosperous societies that that document aspires to without everyone being able to

“play a full and active part in society.”

I am quoting very deliberately from the text.

I want to emphasise how Chelsea and generations of young women living in the overseas territories have cultivated their roles under the auspices of Girlguiding. To lose that without a fight would be abdicating our responsibility to girls like Chelsea who are yet to come.

Alexander Stafford: My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful argument. She paints a rosy picture of what girl guiding was and how it treated her, which is very good; I completely agree with her. However, as I am sure she knows, last year Girlguiding UK went through the biggest rebranding exercise in 113 years. It has changed lots of things, including the uniforms and the logo, to create a new identity to

“address outdated perceptions holding us back”,

according to its press release. Does my right hon. Friend share my concerns that Girlguiding UK sees the overseas territories as outdated and is therefore trying to refresh the brand by throwing off parts of the British territories? Is she concerned that it is not doing what it should be doing and looking after our British girls?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Every youth organisation has to refresh; it has to move forward and be relevant to the 21st century. In so doing, however, it must not cast the baby out with the bathwater. I am not sure that Girlguiding UK is taking the decision that the overseas territories are old-fashioned; it would be incredibly regrettable were it to do so. I think Girlguiding is taking the view that this is all just a bit too difficult and risky, so it is not going to do it any more. That is wrong. We do not want to encourage a generation of snowflakes. We want young girls to learn about how to manage risk, which can be an opportunity as well as a threat. We have to learn about risk. We cannot wrap ourselves in cotton wool. We have to recognise that it is through challenging ourselves and doing the difficult stuff that we actually get better.

We must not abdicate our responsibility to girls like Chelsea or to young women like Eleanor Wills in Salisbury. We want to make sure that British girls overseas are given the same opportunities. Of course, it is not just Turks and Caicos; the hon. Member for Strangford spoke about the important role that girl guiding has

played in Gibraltar. I was struck by the briefing, which described how girl guiding had continued even through the war, when they were all evacuated and became refugees all around the globe.

I failed to declare an interest at the start of my speech: I chair the all-party parliamentary group for Cyprus. I benefited from a fabulous visit to Cyprus a couple of years ago, and there is another coming up—that is not an advert to colleagues! Girl guiding is a way for girls who get posted overseas with their serving forces family members to have some continuity and thrive with the same social engagement and structure—we are back to structure—with which they are familiar. When we go to a new country, it is sometimes difficult to blend in, assimilate and make that adjustment, but girl guiding can provide a route for girls to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) made a point about the Falkland Islands. I have never been to the Falkland Islands, but I know that teenagers from the Falkland Islands end up in Winchester, adjacent to my constituency: Peter Symonds College is the catchment area college for the Falkland Islands, believe it or not. We want to ensure that girls can come from the Falkland Islands—a tiny community that is very remote from the rest of the United Kingdom—to this country and instantly assimilate, with a structure, a familiarity and a routine that they are used to.

I conclude with the point that I have made throughout: this is about giving girls their voice, giving them opportunities and ensuring that they can thrive and become independent young women in an increasingly difficult and challenging society, wherever they are in the globe. This is about managing risk and accepting that risk can sometimes be a challenge. My plea to Girlguiding UK is to stop being so risk-averse; to accept that comms around the globe are a lot easier in the 21st century than they have ever been; and to regard that as an opportunity, not as a chance to shy away from a long-standing tradition that is absolutely cherished by the girls I have spoken to.

10.1 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to follow the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his good sense in securing this important debate, which cuts to the heart of our sense of collectivity, particularly for young people.

I tabled early-day motion 212 on this subject and have written to Girlguiding UK to ask it to reconsider this important decision; I thank many hon. Members here who have already signed that early-day motion and my letter. Many organisations from overseas territories have written to me expressing their dismay at the decision, which they do not understand and were not involved in. There are currently 618 Girl Guides and 182 volunteer leaders in the overseas territories. The decision was taken without consulting them and seemingly without good reason.

The history of girl guiding was recognised by Girlguiding UK when it announced the decision for the overseas territories: it said that guiding for girls who live in British overseas territories has been

“a valued part of Girlguiding UK for much of our 113-year history”.

What has changed to make Girlguiding UK make this rash decision? Decisions like this should not be made just because things are difficult or challenging. Let us overcome the challenges. I ask Girlguiding UK to reconsider its decision and to see the good sense in the arguments that have been made today. I am interested to hear the Minister's remarks, because I trust that he will have the good common sense to see the value of girl guiding in our overseas territories, particularly in the British bases.

I stand here as a former brownie; I think I was a pixie. I also remember, as a former Girl Guide, the joy and pride of earning badges and the hard work that went into them. There was a sense of working together with my friends in a common endeavour to achieve something greater than ourselves. I remember working for the entertainment badge—I cannot remember what it was called—and I remember my mum being very proud of me when I got the highest marks for safety in the home. I got a special award, and she got a phone call from whoever was the head of the brownies. It was one of her proudest moments as a mum—I remember that with great joy and great pride. I know how much girl guiding can do for young women and girls, how it can develop skills of leadership and how it can show that people working together can achieve great things. That is what today's debate is about.

I want to touch on the rationale for the decision and the negative impact that it will have on the girls concerned. A range leader in the Falkland Islands wrote to me to say:

“They will be effectively be barred from the worldwide sisterhood of girl guiding...This is particularly impactful given our remote location and the complications of our geopolitical location.”

That is absolutely true, but why do we not take that risk and rise to the challenge? The world moves on, and girl guiding should be part of that. Its future in the overseas territories and on army bases cannot be put on the “too hard to deal with” pile.

I am proud to support this important debate. I agree with the hon. Member for Strangford that the decision is incomprehensible. I look forward to hearing the Minister's view and seeing whether he can work with us to provide a solution to ensure that girl guiding in the overseas territories and on the army bases has a future.

10.6 am

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) on securing this Backbench Business debate and on setting out the keenly felt concerns about the ability of girls in the British overseas territories to continue to benefit from all that girl guiding has to offer. The importance of girl guiding, and of the opportunities and experiences that it provides, has been amply illustrated by every Member in this debate, which speaks to the impact that girl guiding has in all our constituencies and across the world.

As the largest youth organisation dedicated completely to girls aged between four and 18, Girlguiding UK provides a vital growing space for many girls across the

[Lilian Greenwood]

UK. Girl guiding allows girls and young women to develop their skills and confidence while providing opportunities to which they may not otherwise have access. Like many hon. Members, I am a former brownie and Girl Guide. On my way here today, I reflected on what was perhaps my first taste of leadership as a brownie sixer, and—like my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins)—I too was a pixie. As the mother of former rainbows and brownies, it is heartening to witness the ongoing success of Girlguiding UK, with over 300,000 girls and young women regularly coming together to have fun, learn new skills, go on adventures and make new friends. They are supported by the nearly 70,000 volunteers who enable that to happen by giving their time, skills and energy.

Girlguiding UK has 9,000 members in Nottinghamshire alone, and I have always welcomed the opportunity to meet up with its units in Nottingham South to see the brilliant work that it does. That includes a visit to Wollaton brownies during UK Parliament week to answer their tough questions about the role of an MP and how they can make a difference in their local community. I listened to guides voicing their concerns about the pressures that young women face regarding body image and mental health. I have loved seeing girls working in teams, getting creative, planning activities and presenting their ideas. Last year, I joined volunteer leaders in handing out medals at the Race for Life in Nottingham. I am always impressed by everything Girlguiding UK does to help girls and young women to thrive.

I therefore share the concern raised today regarding the closure of British Girlguiding Overseas. While we all understand the risks that Girlguiding UK identifies, and the resources needed to provide assurance, it is disappointing to contemplate hundreds of girls across the overseas territories missing out on the joys of girl guiding.

The UK overseas territories are an integral and cherished part of the global British family, and the Minister and I were both privileged to address the UK Youth Parliament late last year, which included representatives from the overseas territories. Girlguiding itself has acknowledged that

“guiding for girls who live in British Overseas Territories, has been a valued part of Girlguiding UK for much of our 113-year history.”

There are nine UK overseas territories in which Girlguiding operates and, according to the chief commissioner of British Girlguiding Overseas, there are 618 Girl Guides in the overseas territories and 182 volunteer leaders. I know those numbers have been said before, but they bear repetition. Although that is a very small proportion of all Girlguiding’s members, it would be very sad if British girls and volunteers living outside mainland UK were denied the opportunities that their mothers and grandmothers were afforded for so many years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South said, surely the challenges that Girlguiding cites are not insurmountable and can be overcome.

I am aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who is not present but is Labour’s shadow Minister for the overseas territories, also raised his concerns directly with Girlguiding UK in April 2023 and that he and

other Members, including those present, have been working together in the hope of finding a solution that will allow girl guiding to continue in the overseas territories. In June 2023, before I took up my role, I also wrote to the Minister regarding the issue after constituents raised their concerns about the proposed changes and I was pleased to hear that he was engaging with Girlguiding.

The House last considered the proposals from Girlguiding in September 2023 when the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) led a debate on youth programmes and Girlguiding. The Minister assured the House then that he had been in regular contact with Girlguiding, and that he intended to make them aware of hon. and right hon. Members’ concerns. I would be grateful if he could update us on those discussions.

British Girlguiding Overseas operations in the middle east, Africa, Asia, Benelux, France and Europe closed on 1 September 2023, including units operating on military bases. I share concerns about how that decision will impact girls in armed forces families living overseas. The hon. Member for Strangford and the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North made this point very clearly: it is a time in their lives when they might really need that sense of community that girl guiding provides. I understand that Girlguiding is in communication with the Ministry of Defence and other military stakeholders to explore future guiding support for girls on overseas military bases, and I should be grateful if the Minister would give us a flavour of any discussions he has had with his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and how they are developing.

It is welcome that Girlguiding’s board of trustees decided to extend the timeline for girl guiding activities in overseas territories into this year to allow extra time to explore options that would allow operations to continue. I understand that Girlguiding proposed two options to Government. The first option sought Government funding and the second sought Government support for the management of welfare and risk. Girlguiding has said that the Minister was unwilling to provide Government funding to enable it to continue to operate in the British overseas territories—he might want to say more about that decision—but that his officials are working with it on a second option for an affiliate-type agreement, whereby a Government entity could be responsible for the girls and volunteers and Girlguiding would provide all the materials with which girls are familiar. I am sure that everyone hopes that the Minister will continue that engagement with Girlguiding, no doubt alongside his colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to explore what is possible and to try to find a solution that ensures that girl guiding is still available to girls growing up in the British overseas territories. Perhaps the Minister can say more about that.

Despite Girlguiding being an internationally respected and valued charity that has been operating for more than 100 years, it is understandable that it is thinking about how best to use its resources. Charities across the UK are feeling the impact of a reduction in Government support and of the rising cost of living. The pressure on family budgets has undoubtedly made it harder for them to operate. It is not a new issue; it is affecting charities across the board. Just last week, the Charities Aid Foundation warned that much higher demand and

sustained financial challenges are leading half of charities to say that they are at full capacity and cannot help anyone else.

The impact on young people is particularly concerning. We all know the benefits that activities such as girl guiding can have on children's confidence and the development of valuable skills, yet services that support young people are being shut down or scaled back because of financial difficulties. Reductions to local authority funding resulted in the slashing of their expenditure on youth services in England by 73% since 2010, with more than 4,500 youth work jobs lost, and thousands of youth centres closed. That makes the opportunities provided by voluntary and community organisations even more important, so I understand the difficult decisions trustees face about how best to use their limited resources to maximum benefit, in accordance with their charitable objectives.

Investing in the next generation is absolutely vital. We know the benefits of good youth services and how they can transform young lives. Girlguiding is one of those services. I hope that the Government continue to engage with Girlguiding, and that a solution is found to ensure that girls across our overseas territories do not miss out.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I now call the Minister, who probably won't be telling us whether he was in the pixies or the brownies.

10.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stuart Andrew): Mr Betts, you pre-empt my admission. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today. I would like to thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for tabling this important debate, and for the high expectations he has placed on me. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), and my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), as well as others who have contributed to this debate.

First, let me clarify why I am responding to the debate, as I know that the initial application was to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Like the hon. Member for Strangford, I am incredibly proud to be British, and that includes our wider British family. This Government are committed to protecting the United Kingdom's national interests, ensuring the prosperity of the British people across the overseas territories. The 2012 overseas territories White Paper sets out that Government Departments

“engage with and support the Territories in their areas of expertise and competence.”

Each Department is expected to support the development of the territories and collaborate on areas of mutual interest. For my Department, that means protecting vital youth services for British young people wherever they live, and working closely with Girlguiding to champion the continuation of British Girlguiding Overseas. I am therefore pleased to reply to the debate today.

The overseas territories are an integral part of the UK family and we are united by shared values. The long-standing partnership is based on collaboration and mutual interest, and the Government believe in a modern partnership with the overseas territories. At the UK and Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council

in November, the UK Government and elected leaders of the territory Governments agreed a joint declaration. It sets out our united vision for a modern and productive partnership, which includes commitments to support and develop thriving and resilient communities, and to work in partnership to address the unique challenges facing the territories.

The declaration also reaffirmed the UK Government's overriding priority to protect and promote the interests of the British people of the overseas territories. I note the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North, but I would add that it says in the declaration:

“We believe that the strongest, safest, and most prosperous societies are those in which all people”—

so that would include women—

“can live freely without fear of unlawful discrimination and play a full and active part in society.”

The UK strategy on overseas territories will include a chapter on communities, and will include women and girls within that. I hope that satisfies my right hon. Friend.

Last year, the Government provided £85 million in official development aid to eligible overseas territories to support infrastructure programmes. It has also provided £18 million of cross-Government funding through the conflict, stability and security fund to support justice systems, governance, border security and support for environment and climate changes. Additionally, the FCDO has provided another £19 million to ensure that priorities are met abroad and that the Government fulfil their constitutional and internal obligations. I hope that demonstrates how committed we are to supporting the territories to be vibrant and flourishing communities, and why my Department is dedicated to generating wider opportunities for their people. As the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), said, we have both had the privilege of hearing them directly at that amazing meeting of the Youth Parliament.

As highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford, uniformed youth organisations such as Girlguiding make a tremendous difference to young people's lives. Volunteers work tirelessly to provide early intervention, develop trusted relationships, facilitate opportunities and create safe spaces, helping to build thriving communities and supporting young people to achieve their ambitions. Other Members talked about their experiences in the brownies. You are right, Mr Betts—I was not in the brownies. However, I was in the cubs, and I remember my experiences there, not least camping in a field when the tent fell down at 3 am—that stayed with me for a long time. I also remember taking part in Remembrance parades as a cub, which instilled in me a value that I hold dear today.

Participation in uniformed youth groups is shown to provide long-term mental health benefits, improve young people's skills for life, and support the development of positive personality traits. Such organisations have consistently demonstrated that members display increased confidence, reduced anxiety and increased community participation, which is incredibly important. The overseas territories were therefore understandably disappointed to learn that Girlguiding decided to cease its overseas operations. I know that many hon. Members were

[Stuart Andrew]

disappointed, and they have eloquently spoken of their concerns. I was equally disheartened, as I have seen the benefits that can be gained for young people who participate in the programmes hosted by organisations such as Girlguiding. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North mentioned, Mr Speaker has also taken a great interest in the issue and met Girlguiding in November alongside my officials and officials from the FCDO to discuss possible solutions.

I must emphasise that Girlguiding is an independent charitable organisation and its board of trustees has a fiscal responsibility to take decisions that are in Girlguiding's best interest and to enable it to achieve its charitable purposes, secure its future and ensure the safety of its members. Those are not decisions that Girlguiding has taken lightly. We understand that its decision to cease overseas operations is due to the increasing complexity of providing Girlguiding's board of trustees with appropriate assurances on both the safety of members and the integrity of operations, in line with its legal responsibilities across 36 countries and territories. Operations in the British overseas territories were initially scheduled to cease from 31 December last year. However, following discussions with my officials, Girlguiding's board of trustees took the decision to delay that until the beginning of this year.

The hon. Member for Strangford told me to be prepared. I am pleased to say that we have been prepared. We have also been seeking ways to take this further. That has given us more time to consider all the options that might enable British Girlguiding Overseas to continue in the territories, and for conversations between Girlguiding, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the FCDO and the Ministry of Defence to continue. I would like to express my thanks to Girlguiding's board of trustees for delaying the cessation of operations abroad so that we can fully explore all the options and support a local solution that is consistent with Girlguiding's decisions about what is appropriate for the organisation. I totally understand the strength of feeling, and that is why we are carefully working across Government to see what solutions can be found.

Although I do not want to raise any expectations, we are having another meeting this evening with the overseas territories to explore the other available options. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North said, girls such as Chelsea really do value girl guiding. I share my right hon. Friend's support for ensuring that girls and women have their voices heard, and I will continue to ensure that we do everything we can to explore all the options that may be available.

In 2022, we committed to the national youth guarantee with an investment of more than £500 million to ensure that by 2025, every young person in England will have access to regular clubs, activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer. The aims of the guarantee are ambitious; to achieve them, we are investing in programmes such as the youth investment fund, the National Citizen Service, the Duke of Edinburgh award, the #iwill campaign and uniformed youth groups, in addition to supporting the sector workforce and strengthening the evidence base.

I cannot overstate the importance to me and my Department of providing opportunities for young people. We fully recognise the benefits that girl guiding brings to girls and young women. That is why the uniformed youth fund forms part of the national youth guarantee investment, providing Girlguiding with more than £2 million to create more opportunities to take part in girl guiding in England. Girlguiding has already created more than 3,000 new places, recruited hundreds of new volunteers and opened 100 new units, with more to come.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South asked why we were unable to offer funding. The uniformed youth fund is funded under section 70 of the Charities Act 2006, which limits where we can provide funding. Notably, activities funded must

"directly or indirectly benefit the whole or any part of England".

But that does not mean that we will not explore all the available options to see what can be done.

Right hon. and hon. Members have given great examples of the work of Girlguiding, and I want to also offer my thanks to the organisation for the inspirational work it does in so many of our communities up and down the country. I recognise that that funding is limited to England under the Charities Act, but that does not negate the fact that we believe that every child, no matter where they live, should have access to a thriving youth sector. That is why my Department continues to lead those discussions. I hope to report back to Members following the meeting tonight, and I will also update Members as discussions progress.

In conclusion, youth services and organisations such as Girlguiding provide essential services for young people and communities. As a Department, we are absolutely committed to ensuring that all young people have access to those regular clubs, activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer. While that is being provided for young people in England, we are equally passionate about opportunities for young people wherever they are. We will continue to work with Girlguiding and explore every option that may be available to us. As I committed to a moment ago, I will update the Members present when those discussions have concluded.

10.28 am

Jim Shannon: Can I first thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have made contributions? I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), and the Minister as well. The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) brought to the debate personal knowledge of being a Girl Guide, and of her participation in the brownies some 40 years ago—that is hard to believe; I am sure it is probably much less time than that. Whatever the case may be, I thank the right hon. Lady for her contribution. We heard about the safeguarding and risk management challenges and all the necessities that were put in place, and about how—I say this with all graciousness—the brownies helped the right hon. Lady to develop and promoted challenges and thoughts that brought her to this place today, a place where there should be that opportunity for young girls and ladies.

We are really fortunate, Mr Betts, to have three ladies here in Westminster Hall today who all were members of the brownies over the years. I do not recall another debate in which three of the MPs present were

three former members of the same organisation. That is quite an achievement and reflects why this issue is so important.

The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North also referred to the parliamentary week for Girl Guides and that is something that, if God spares me, I will take up next time around. She outlined very well what it does and talked about her trip to the headquarters in Salisbury and the young girls she met, in particular Chelsea. I have never met Chelsea but, judging from what the right hon. Lady said, she is an exceptional young lady who could end up in this place someday to represent the people in her constituency, wherever that may be. I look forward to that day.

My good friend the hon. Member for Bradford South said that Girl Guides overcome challenges. Really, that is what this debate is about: overcoming challenges. It is about the Girl Guides and the pixies, which she was a member of. I remember when the Girl Guides were operating in Greyabbey and one of the other villages nearby. I had three boys, so they went into the Boys' Brigade, but the ladies always said to me, "You know, whenever you get a wee girl, she can join us in the pixies and the brownies." Well, we never got the wee girl. We could not be sure that it would be a wee girl, and I think my wife was not really committed to having another child, so that opportunity did not come.

We have heard about people's personal experience and the negative impact of closing down British Girlguiding Overseas, so I hope the Girl Guides can work with us to find a way forward. Minister, that is the request from the hon. Ladies—indeed, from us all. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referred to the importance of the uniformed youth organisations. The Minister has really got that point, and his response to the debate also convinced us of that.

The hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) referred to his time in the Falklands, which has a population of about 3,500, and the important work that the Girl Guides do there and in many overseas territories.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South, the shadow Minister, is another product of the pixies, the brownies and the Girl Guides. Wow—what personal experiences we have heard about today from all three hon. Ladies. It was a pleasure, a privilege and an honour to be here and hear those things. The shadow Minister referred to the opportunities that the Girl Guides give girls today, but these things do not just happen. There are 70,000 volunteers—I never knew that until this morning. These are the many people outside the Girl Guides who make it happen: the parents and the ladies, and no doubt the gentlemen as well, who all make a contribution.

The Girl Guides are also a valued part of the overseas territories and the United Kingdom globally. Indeed, they are a vital part of the Britishness that the Minister referred to. He and I—indeed, all of us here—clearly share that Britishness: that love and that commitment to Britain, which we very much treasure.

I am glad that the timeline for consultation has been extended. We hope that the Girl Guides will have the confidence to speak and act, and to invest in the next generation.

The Minister encapsulated things well. Although I perhaps put some gentle pressure on him in introducing the debate, and while others have also done so, we did so in a nice way, because we understand that he is a Minister who is always genuinely courteous to us all, and I think he understands this issue only too well. His response was incredibly helpful, and I think we will all take immense comfort from his words.

The Government have committed to retaining our Britishness in the overseas territories, protecting vital services such as the Girl Guides. The overseas territories are an integral part of the UK. There is a modern and productive partnership, and a commitment to that partnership and to the wider opportunities that Girl Guiding gives, including the camping out and Remembrance Sunday. I am reminded—as I am sure we all are—that every year, when I go to the Remembrance Sunday service at Newtownards, I always take note of the uniformed organisations, and the Girl Guides are always there. They are always smart in their uniforms and always in step—although they do take time to wave to their parents and grandparents as they walk. It is really important to instil that Britishness—that respect and that honour, which the Minister very much encapsulates. There is much comfort to take from his words, and I hope that is so for the ladies and gentlemen in the Gallery today on behalf of Girl Guides.

The Government have further committed to provide opportunities for young girls through the uniformed youth new groups fund for Girl Guides and other organisations in the United Kingdom. Some 100-plus units have been opened in the UK—I did not know that, so I thank the Minister for that update. He clearly understands why we secured this debate and why it is important, and the people here today are all committed to the same objective. In that respect, all of us, and probably the primary movers behind the debate, recognise in the Minister's words an intention to find a solution. The talks are ongoing, and I am sure that the Minister will—I know he will—come back to each and every one of us and tell us what the results of that are.

We have confidence in the Minister, and in his ability, wish and strength of mind to find a solution. As I said earlier in introducing the debate, it is all about solutions—you know that, Mr Betts, as an elected representative, because that is what your constituents want to hear. This is about how we find that solution. Again, I thank the Minister very much for that. I thank all the people in the Gallery for coming along and, in particular, the right hon. and hon. Members who, in drawing on their personal experiences, made this such a good debate. It was a joy to listen to and a pleasure to behold.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of Girlguiding UK in the British Overseas Territories.

10.37 am

Sitting suspended.

Heather Burning on Peatlands

11 am

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of heather burning on peatlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Betts.

On 9 October last year, smoke, ash and air pollution engulfed the Sheffield, Hallam constituency and beyond. A great many people contacted me on that day and afterwards to complain about the air quality, which was four times over the legal limit for air pollution. It was a relatively still day, so the smoke took a while to dissipate, and the unique topography of my constituency meant that constituents were very much affected. Constituents contacted me to say that they had trouble breathing and that it caused coughing and eye irritation. It was particularly distressing for members of my community with respiratory conditions.

The reason for the smoke was heather burning on the moorlands to the west of Sheffield. Natural England, which is investigating the burns, tells me that

“the moorland estates located within SSSIs close to Sheffield usually have Agri-Environment Higher Level Stewardship agreements that contain burning plans.”

I will not comment on the specifics of last year’s burn, because we do not know whether it was legal, but it is entirely possible that it was legal, despite the rocketing pollution levels and the damaging effects on my community.

I started with that anecdote because the fact is that this could be perfectly lawful behaviour, which highlights some of the problems with the current regulations. Burns such as these are a regular occurrence in my constituency, often with similar, if not quite so dramatic, effects. The immediate impact on air quality is obvious, but the burning also undermines our ability to address the twin climate and nature crises facing us by damaging the precious blanket peat bog habitats that would otherwise exist.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this issue forward. She and I agree on the importance of this subject, although we might have slightly different opinions about what is happening. Does the hon. Lady agree—I think she does, but I want to have it on the record—that those who own or manage the moors try to manage them in an environmentally sensitive way? As such, the burning of the moors is part of what happens for the purpose of shooting on the moors, as the hon. Lady will know. Burning helps to regenerate the moors for the next season and increases bird yields. Does the hon. Lady agree that we must recognise all the different factors that are important for moors? Has there been any engagement with those who manage or own the moors to find a way to do this that does not, by its very nature, cause any inconvenience to others?

Olivia Blake: That is a good point. Yes, I have been out to various moorland owners in my constituency and beyond to see regenerative projects—for example, planting sphagnum moss plugs and other things that people are doing to try to improve the quality of the moors—but I still think that further Government intervention is needed. The immediate impact of burning is obvious, but the long-term impact should concern us all. As

I was about to say, we have to make sure that we take into consideration the climate and nature crises as well as the health implications of burning, which is damaging our precious blanket bogs.

The peatlands are so important. We have 13% of the Earth’s blanket peat bogs in the UK, which is the largest proportion in the world. They are essentially our rainforests, and I am proud to represent a constituency that includes some of that landscape. Unfortunately, as I have seen at first hand, the vast proportion of our peatland is degraded. It is hard to see the difference between a degraded peatland and one in good health, because there is damage to so much of our peatland, and part of that is due to the burning.

Burning not only damages the ecosystem that supports an abundance of wildlife, but is bad for the climate. In the natural and rewetted state, peatlands have the potential to store carbon dioxide on a large scale and can be a vital asset for helping us decarbonise our country, but when they are degraded, they do the exact opposite. Nationally, the damage means that our peatlands emit the equivalent CO₂ of 140,000 cars per year; the burns themselves release 260,000 tonnes of CO₂ annually. The burning also makes the effects of the climate crisis worse, because when the heather is burnt, the fire kills off the spongy sphagnum moss underneath that acts as a natural barrier to rain run-off. One expert described the moss to me as a Persian carpet—it is very absorbent; you can squeeze it, and if you jump up and down on a healthy bog, someone 20 metres away will be able to feel the vibration because of the water held in the moss. It is very rare to find that in the UK now.

Losing the moss means that we often see down-valley flooding, which will become more and more likely if that environment is not protected and restored. If we want to slow the flow, a good place to start would be by maintaining the sphagnum moss and making sure that it is in good condition to do the job that it has evolved to do. Global heating means that our winters are getting wetter, and we are already beginning to see the effects in floods up and down the country. Rather than destroying natural flood defences, we need to protect them to ensure that we mitigate the worst effects of the climate emergency.

Some say that we need burning to control fuel loads on the moors, and that without it overgrown heather would cause wildfires, but the more heather is burned, the more it grows and the more we are locked into a cycle of burning. Is it not better to break that cycle by restoring the moorland monoculture back to its former health, rewetting the peat and reintroducing the more vibrant biodiversity that was there before the burns, and, in fact, before the draining of many of our peatlands?

That is why I was pleased, in 2020, when the Government announced that they would introduce stronger regulations to control the burns. In fact, the current licensing regime was introduced shortly after a similar debate to this that I was lucky enough to secure, in which the Minister told me that the old system was clearly

“not protecting every blanket bog site.”—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2020; Vol. 684, c. 216WH.]

However, the details of the 2021 regulations left a lot to be desired. Licensing is required only on peatland of a depth of 40 cm or more, and we do not have an agreed national map of that. The Wildlife and Countryside Link estimates that the current law therefore leaves about 60% of UK peatlands without any protection.

Three years on, it is useful to take stock of whether the new regulatory regime is working for the peatlands that it does include. Unfortunately, data from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds suggests that it is not. We are halfway through this burning season, so we do not have the full figures for this year, but during 2022-23, 260 records of burning in the English uplands were reported to the RSPB via its dedicated app, of which 87% took place in special areas of conservation and special protected areas. The RSPB believes that 72, or 28%, of the 260 burns reported to it may have breached the regulations by taking place on protected areas of peat over 40 cm in depth. The year before, the RSPB received 272 reports: one in three burns took place on peat likely to be deeper than 25 cm, and four out of five took place in SSSIs, special protected areas and special areas of conservation. Although the Government issued no licences for burns in 2021, 70 reported burns took place on peat likely to be deeper than 40 cm in protected sites, violating the regulations. In the last two years, without considering the current season, it is therefore likely that at least 142 burns were illegal.

In 2023, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs successfully prosecuted two estate owners and issued a warning to a third, but that is only three cases. The level of enforcement action is not anywhere near the level of potential law breaking. The figures show that the new system is clearly not working and that the law needs to go much further to stop this damaging practice, rather than continue the partial prohibition we have seen. It is high time that there is an outright ban.

I raised this issue in the Chamber with the previous Secretary of State for Environment and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). I am sorry to say that she told me not only that she was not considering a ban, but that my constituents should be happy with the air quality they have. I hope that new leadership in the Department will produce a less disappointing and dismissive response, because it is important to get this issue right. Unfortunately, the Government are not getting it right or rising to the level of ambition required.

The latest Climate Change Committee progress report on reducing UK emissions says that restoration of peatlands is already significantly off track compared with the CCC's balanced pathway. In 2022-23, the overall amount of UK peatlands restored was a measly 12,700 hectares. Although that is an increase on the previous year, to meet next year's target of 29,000 hectares will require more than a doubling of the current rate. Even if the Government match that target, the CCC recommends a UK-wide rate of 67,000 hectares per year by 2025.

I know the Minister will point me to the Government's England peat action plan, but the truth is we are not meeting the targets that we need to. We see a failure of delivery of Government policy on peatlands and, even worse, a failure of ambition. That needs to change, and change urgently. It has been a pleasure to go out on the moors in my constituency and elsewhere in the country to see projects dedicated to rewetting and restoring peatlands. Instead of burning, we need more projects such as those, and for other degraded habitats, supported by concerted Government-led strategy to reverse the decline in nature.

The Minister lives very close to where I grew up. I recently went for a walk with the family and I tried to show them some healthy sphagnum moss on the moorlands in his constituency. It was very difficult to find some in good condition, to show what I was talking about. That shows a wider issue than in my own constituency, where we do have a lot of burning. We know that the degradation of peatlands is of great importance to communities up and down the country.

Heather burning is bad for the environment, bad for the climate crisis and, as the recent burns in my constituency have graphically illustrated, bad for the health of people in Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam in particular. I hope the Minister will consider a complete ban on burns and offer a comprehensive, joined-up plan to restore these habitats. I am proud to say that I have the support of our Mayor, Oliver Coppard, and the leader of Sheffield City Council, Tom Hunt, who have both been outspoken on their wish to see a further ban.

We have been trying to contact certain landowners about this practice, to ensure we have a way to deal with the needs of peatland owners while balancing them against those of local communities. Where air pollution levels are breached, it is important that local authorities have the powers to stop that happening, to protect people's health and the environment in the uplands, which is so important for those who live downstream.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) for securing this important debate, and giving me the opportunity to respond to some of the points that have been made.

The United Kingdom boasts some of the world's most extensive peatlands, with nearly 3 million hectares of peatland area. That precious habitat is of huge national importance, which the hon. Member rightly identifies. Those precious habitats are vital as we protect those sites for future generations. The Government's commitment to the protection and restoration of those habitats achieves several environmental benefits, including cutting carbon emissions, optimising biodiversity, minimising wildlife hazards and improving water and air quality.

I will dive straight into the regulations to which the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam referred. On 16 February 2021, the Government published the Heather and Grass etc. Burning (England) Regulations 2021 to protect blanket bog habitats in England. The regulations came into force in May of that year and were introduced to prevent burning on areas of peat of over 40 cm deep on sites of special scientific interest—SSSIs—or on special protection and conservation areas, except under licence.

The regulations were seen as a game changer in protecting peat bog areas. They limited the practice of burning on protected blanket bog, except when a licence has been granted for reasons such as wildfire mitigation or supporting peatland restoration. The regulations are a crucial step forward in meeting the Government's nature and climate change mitigation and adaptation targets, including the legally binding commitments to

[Robbie Moore]

reach net zero carbon emissions. Data from the moorland change map suggests a decline in burning and cutting on moorland areas since the introduction of these regulations in 2021. DEFRA, supported by Natural England, has been swift to act on breaches of these regulations, and it secured two successful prosecutions last year. The low numbers of alleged offences and successful prosecutions show that compliance with the regulations is high and that stakeholders have been receptive.

However, burning can be the right tool in the mitigation and management of heather in certain circumstances. These regulations were designed to strike the right balance between protecting our habitats from harm and ensuring that our landowners and land managers have the right tools available to better protect, restore and manage heather moorland. We also need to be mindful of wildfire mitigation, human safety, conservation, and the management of our natural environment. Burning can be necessary if the specified vegetation cannot be managed through mechanical means of preventing heather growth, given the topography of the moorland. A range of measures, including burning, must be available, and the regulations give land managers the option to seek an exemption.

I want to go deeper into the regulations. They are a means to better enhance blanket bogs and to protect these valuable landscapes that we all care so deeply about. For an applicant to be granted a licence under the 2021 regulations, they must demonstrate that they have at least tried or considered alternative methods of land management and explain why measures other than burning are not possible. They must also set out how they intend to manage the land without burning in the future, and ideally facilitate peatland restoration.

Olivia Blake: May I ask the Minister how many licences have been granted? If it is truly an act of last resort, it would be interesting to know those figures, given that the number of burns on sites of special scientific interest and protected landscapes continues to be high, to determine whether the regulations are protecting and meeting the needs of those areas.

Robbie Moore: The regulations relate specifically to SSSIs, with the additional protection measures that have been put in place. The majority of licence applications under the 2021 regulations are for the purpose of reducing the risk of wildfires. With regard to the specific detail, I am more than happy to write to the hon. Lady about the number of applications received, although not all are progressed to the grant of a licence. I am sure that she will agree that having the tools available to mitigate the risks is crucial to the protection of our landscape, habitat and communities. As she rightly pointed out, I live in a constituency with moorland, where there was a fire several years ago right up to the boundaries of Ilkley, so I know that it is important that all means of managing habitat are available.

DEFRA funds a training programme designed to consolidate knowledge, skills and understanding of vegetation fires, including wildfire incidence and prescribed fire operations. The aim is to support landowners and land managers to manage their land in a way that

reduces the risk from wildfire, with the expectation that that will reduce the need to burn for such a purpose. Since the development of the 2021 regulations, more than 1,000 Lantra-accredited training modules have been completed by public and private land managers.

Restoring peatlands to a favourable condition will go a long way towards reducing the need to burn heather on land, as healthy blanket bogs pose a much lower risk of wildfire because they are wetter and have a lower fuel load. We must not forget, however—this is important—that all options are available for a land manager to explore. When heather continues to grow for many years, it comprises a heavy, woody stock, which poses its own fire risk. Therefore, with a specified burning management plan associated with many agri-environmental stewardship agreements granted via Natural England, it is important not only that those plans are adhered to, but that the relationship between Natural England and the land manager has been established, so that we can manage our peatlands as successfully as we can to reduce the risks of wildfire.

We are ramping up levels of peatland restoration through the nature for climate fund, which provides funding for the restoration of at least 35,000 hectares of peatland by 2025. A restoration grant scheme delivered by Natural England has committed financially to restoring approximately 27,000 hectares of peatland. In addition, restoration is being delivered through countryside stewardship and other Government schemes. DEFRA has also committed, through the third national adaptation programme published in July 2023, to keep the case for extending protections against burning on peat under review.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam, referred to flooding and peat restoration partnerships. Such partnerships have proved highly effective, and they are an example of stakeholders working together to restore peatland. In the north of England alone, almost 45,000 acres of moorland have been repaired and re-vegetated. I am aware that in the North Pennines area of outstanding national beauty, work to block agricultural grains through an agri-environmental stewardship scheme and a land manager working closely with Natural England has resulted in the North Pennines AONB peatland programme being awarded a climate change award at the County Durham environmental awards in 2015.

A Natural England evidence review of the effects of managed burning on upland peatland biodiversity, carbon and water concluded that no evidence had been identified relating specifically to the risk of burning for watercourse flow or downstream flood events. I therefore highlight that while Natural England has carried out that review, continued monitoring will take place.

I must also pick up on the visit of the hon. Lady to my constituency. I am not sure which moor she walked across, but if it was Ilkley moor—

Olivia Blake *indicated assent.*

Robbie Moore: The hon. Lady is nodding, but she might or might not be aware that Ilkley moor is owned by the local authority, Bradford Council, and that no burning has taken place for a significant number of years. The fact that she could not find any sphagnum moss on a moor that has had no burning for a significant period of time does not help the case that she is making.

In my constituency, I have visited Keighley moor—it is not owned by Bradford Council but it has a management programme in place—and seen an abundance of sphagnum moss there, which is managed by various means.

On the points that the hon. Lady made specifically regarding her constituency, she will be aware of Sheffield City Council's work to promote sustainable land management in the Peak district to reduce burning, with the aim of improving air quality in those areas. Poor air quality is the greatest environmental threat to human health, as we all agree, and the Government recognise the need to drive down air pollution and its impacts on human health and the environment. That is why we have set up two stretching new targets for fine particulate matter—the pollutant most harmful to human health—under the Environment Act 2021. Our dual target approach will ensure reductions where concentrations are highest, as well as reducing average exposure across the country by over a third by 2040 compared with 2018, making a significant contribution to improving public health.

We need to drive down emissions across all sectors to achieve our targets, and we have set out the comprehensive and wide-ranging action that we are taking to clean up our air in the environmental improvement plan, which came into effect last year. That includes improving our regulatory framework for industry to drive innovation and tackle our air quality and net zero goals hand in hand. The continued support to local authorities, including through our £883-million nitrogen dioxide programme, will certainly help with that. That has included funding for the hon. Lady's constituency to support the delivery of the Sheffield clean air zone and other measures to tackle NO₂ exceedances.

I recognise that the impacts of moorland burning on air quality are a concern to the hon. Lady, and for that reason she has brought this debate to the House, but I want to reiterate that moorland management has to consider all options, and the regulations that we brought in in 2021 have been well received by many stakeholders who engaged with that process. I think that we have reached a balance that can be well received by all. I want to allow the hon. Lady a chance to respond—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair) *indicated dissent.*

Robbie Moore: Okay. I will continue with another little point—I wanted to ensure that I was doing it all correctly in this Westminster Hall debate.

I am happy to tell the hon. Lady that we are committed to exploring adding particulate matter and other air pollutant emissions from moorland practices to our national atmospheric emissions inventory. That work is currently being explored by teams at DEFRA and we will continue to look at additional evidence that is put forward. I hope that that work, as well as the 2021 regulations, provides some reassurance to the hon. Lady that the Government are taking this matter incredibly seriously, along with the £883 million that we have given to local authorities, including her own, to roll out and assist with the Sheffield clean air zone. In summary, I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate and for raising her concerns today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Human Rights in Hong Kong

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of human rights in Hong Kong.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. It is another week, and yet another debate on China and its abuses—of its citizens and beyond its territorial borders. In this Chamber and the main Chamber, we have discussed the abuses against the Tibetans, the Uyghurs and other people within the confines of China and beyond. Today I want to discuss the situation of dwindling human rights in Hong Kong.

Fortuitously, it is particularly topical to debate this motion today, during the pantomime of the trial of Jimmy Lai that continues in Hong Kong. Also today, as we speak, the Chinese Government face their universal periodic review at the United Nations. I will say more about that later.

The implementation in 2020 of the notorious national security law has led to the drastic erosion of the freedoms of the people of Hong Kong that were once greatly enjoyed under the Sino-British joint declaration. Beijing's introduction of that draconian law is a direct attack on the "one country, two systems" framework that we have a particularly strong interest as well as a duty and obligation to make sure is being upheld. The future of human rights in Hong Kong is bleak. I want to thank Hong Kong Watch, the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation and the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, not just for the various briefings they have provided for the debate but for their ongoing sterling work in this area to highlight the injustices being done to the once democracy-loving people in Hong Kong.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for his introduction and for securing such an important debate. He mentioned Jimmy Lai; the trial began last December, and China is treating him as a Chinese citizen even though he has dual nationality. Does the hon. Member believe that the Government should follow Labour's idea, and appoint a special envoy for arbitrary detention for British and dual nationals held abroad? If not, what does he suggest?

Tim Loughton: I will come to Jimmy Lai. I was not aware of any policy statement that the Labour party may have made, but the particular point about Jimmy Lai is that he is not a dual national: he is a British citizen. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and I, with others, have espoused that argument in this Chamber on numerous occasions and have got absolutely nowhere with Ministers, until recently with the new Foreign Secretary, from whom, I am glad to say, we have at last had the admission that Jimmy Lai is a British citizen—end of story. As such, he is entitled to all the consulate and other protections to which any other British citizen being persecuted against all natural tenets of law is entitled. I will come back to the Jimmy Lai trial.

There is no greater symptom or expression of the oppression that is going on in Hong Kong than the mass exodus of its citizens on a daily basis. Since the introduction of the national security law in 2020, Hong Kong residents have felt the strangulation of their freedoms. As a consequence, many have chosen to leave what has been their home for decades and generations, to escape persecution under that draconian law.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech and he is a doughty campaigner on this issue. It is fair to say that those who have come over on British national overseas visas have made an extraordinary contribution to our society; for example, the Liberal Democrats are really proud of Councillor Ying Perrett, who was elected to Surrey Heath Borough Council just last year. However, for those who are already here, their children are not allowed to come here on BNO visas in the same way; they have to apply through the Chinese consulate and have to go back to Hong Kong. The hon. Gentleman mentioned a change in tone from the Foreign Secretary. Has he had any words with the Home Secretary about a change in the rules, so that the children of Hongkongers who want to be here longer term do not have to go through that rigmarole?

Tim Loughton: Without being as parochial as to mention every one of the 191,000 applications for the BNO visa route so far, this is a subject that has been raised. It was also raised in the Home Affairs Committee, which I sit on, and we had a private session with people from Hong Kong who were escaping the clutches of the Chinese Government. I am well aware, and have made representations, that we need to ensure that people who technically have not been included in that net, although it has been broadened, can be given those protections as well. The hon. Lady makes a valid point, but I cannot comment on her particular district councillor.

The mass exodus has amounted to over 500,000 residents leaving Hong Kong since the beginning of 2021. As I have said, there have been 191,000 applications for the BNO visa route. According to the Home Office, 144,500 Hongkongers have already moved to the UK, and that last figure is rising as we speak. Hong Kong's population has therefore experienced a net loss since the introduction of the national security law and is in decline for the third year in a row. Hong Kong used to be a colony that was ever-expanding and where everybody wanted to go to have an exciting future, but it is now shrinking; it is a shadow of its former self.

Since the implementation of the NSL, Hong Kong has seen a marked decrease in various world rankings of liberty—most noticeably in Freedom House's global freedom ranking, where it has dropped 17 places. Hong Kong has seen significant declines in the rule of law, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, with think-tanks citing China's increasing restrictions on civil liberties as a factor. After Myanmar, Hong Kong experienced the steepest drop in such rankings. It ranked 140 out of 180 locations for international press freedoms, according to Reporters Sans Frontières, which leaves it trailing behind Colombia and Cameroon.

We have also seen the forced closure and hounding out of many civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and charities. It has been calculated that

as of December 2023, no fewer than 800 such organisations had been forced to close, with over 285 people arrested—172 of whom were prosecuted for allegedly endangering national security.

In 2021, Amnesty International had to close two of its offices in Hong Kong. The Apple Daily Charitable Foundation was removed from the list of Hong Kong registered charities. The New School for Democracy, which was founded by Wang Dan, an exiled student leader of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, has had to move to Taiwan following the implementation of the national security law. The Global Innovation Hub—a German think-tank that was expelled from China in 1997—has moved from Hong Kong to Taiwan, also citing the national security law.

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions was dissolved in 2021; the Civil Human Rights Front, a pro-democracy group that organised some of Hong Kong's biggest protests, said it had no choice but to disband; and human rights lawyers based in Hong Kong are fleeing abroad amid China's effort to cleanse the city of dissent. In 2021, the Progressive Teachers' Alliance, Hong Kong's largest teaching union, was disbanded; that same year, the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China was among other unions dissolved amid national security fears; and recently the 4 June vigil to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre has been banned.

Press outlets have also been closed down, and not just *Apple Daily*—Jimmy Lai's paper, which we hear so much about—and its sister publication, *Next Magazine*: Stand News closed after being raided by police, and senior staff were arrested; Citizen News was forced to shut down amid the Government crackdown; and FactWire, an investigative news outlet, closed down, with its leaders citing safety concerns for staff.

Many of the guardians of free speech in Hong Kong have been arrested, prosecuted and jailed, if they were not able to flee. We particularly think of those, like Jimmy Lai, who stayed and made an honourable and brave stand to face up to the intolerance. That led to the prosecution that is going on now—the biggest pantomime in the far east.

Before 2019, the number of political prisoners went from nought to 1,775. Hong Kong now has one of the fastest growing political prisoner populations in the world, rivaling authoritarian states such as Cuba, Myanmar and Belarus. Further, Hong Kong has the highest number of female political prisoners in the world, at approximately 1,347. Many famous people have been incarcerated along with Jimmy Lai. They are, undoubtedly and without dispute, political prisoners in a place that used to boast of freedom of speech, democracy and all the liberties that we in this country take for granted.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): This is possibly the most important part of the many aspects of the destruction of freedom and liberty in Hong Kong: the absence of a free and fair court system. It shows why Jimmy Lai's case is so important, as the one that we can hear about most easily in this country when there are so many hundreds of others. Does the hon. Gentleman share my frustration that, after all this time, seeing what we can now see about what the court system has come to in Hong Kong, there are still retired British judges operating in that jurisdiction?

Tim Loughton: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point entirely. He has done so much through the all-party parliamentary group on Hong Kong to flag up the outrages going on there. On the British judges who have been brought up, and have trained and practised in one of the most respected legal domains in the world and who have then gone out to Hong Kong for semi-retirement jobs: that they can continue to practise in a place that has so blatantly snuffed out all the basic tenets of international law and freedoms that we all take for granted is extraordinary. If they have not been banned from doing so, out of a sense of decency for their own profession and the values that they are able to practise in this country but not in Hong Kong, they should come back as a matter of urgency.

I return to the matter of the democratic process. Voting has become something of a pantomime, declining hugely with new rules that only allow for patriots-only elections—however the Chinese Communist Government may define that. The new rules led to a collapse in voter turnout to just 27.5% in 2023, in stark contrast with the pre-national security law days when that figure was typically well into the seventies.

Religious persecution has also become commonplace. There are more than 1 million followers of Taoism and more than 1 million Buddhists in the country. Yet, according to 18 pastors and religious experts interviewed by the *Washington Post*,

“churches have been pushed into censoring themselves and avoiding appointing pastors deemed to have political views, and at least one major church is restructuring itself in case the government freezes its assets.”

Fears around the national security law have led to widespread self-censorship by clergy in their sermons, just as it has in Tibet and Xinjiang. In Tibet, for instance, simply to possess a photograph of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is instantly punishable with a prison sentence—typically of five years. That shows absolutely extraordinary intolerance.

Businesses are in decline and leaving Hong Kong. More than 50% of Hong Kong professionals have considered leaving the city, according to one recent survey. Democracy has been snuffed out in Hong Kong and the right to oppose politically has effectively been snuffed out there too. Scrutineers of free speech and liberty have been closed down and either forced to flee Hong Kong all together or incarcerated. Press freedom has certainly been completely snuffed out, which also explains why the Hong Kong Government plan to install no fewer than 2,000 additional CCTV cameras in public places so they can spy on the population to make sure it is doing what it is told by its Chinese Communist Government masters.

The number of political prisoners has gone through the roof. For those members of the Hong Kong population who have not been able to join the mass exodus, China has killed the golden goose that used to be Hong Kong, previously a bastion of liberty, opportunity, democracy and entrepreneurialism.

I will touch on the Jimmy Lai trial, which opened on 18 December 2023. He is a British citizen, as the Government have at last acknowledged, who founded the now defunct *Apple Daily*—the largest pro-democracy newspaper in Hong Kong at the time. He is now facing three charges under Hong Kong's Beijing-imposed National

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Security Law, carrying a maximum punishment of life in prison, and a charge of conspiracy to publish seditious publications.

On 2 January, Jimmy Lai pleaded not guilty to conspiring to collude with foreign forces in publishing allegedly seditious materials at his trial under Hong Kong's national security law, after multiple delays before the trial actually started.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. Since the first group of British citizens he referred to was named, the British ex-consul general to Hong Kong has also been named in this process. Unless I have missed something, I have not heard the Foreign Office say anything about the naming of its ex-consul general in those terms. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is rather strange that an ex-employee of the Foreign Office, who represented it in Hong Kong, has been named in a trial, but somehow the Foreign Office has not said a word about it?

Tim Loughton: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and fellow China sanctionee. I am not sure whether I should have declared that at the beginning; it is not a quite a registered interest, but it is certainly an interest that many people register these days. We remain censored for, I think, coming up to three years. I agree absolutely with my right hon. Friend, because this trial has gone beyond just Jimmy Lai, as I will mention. There are other people mentioned who are closer to home physically.

The prosecution rapidly named several foreign politicians and human rights activists, including the former consul general mentioned by my right hon. Friend, with whom Mr Lai had been in contact in recent years, and showed headshots of them. Among them are Hong Kong Watch co-founder and chief executive, Benedict Rogers, and the executive director of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China—IPAC—Luke de Pulford, both of whom I call friends. They have done so much for the cause of liberty for those people within China.

Also named are the US consul general to Hong Kong, Ambassador James Cunningham, who chairs the board of the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong; Bill Browder, the human rights campaigner, with whom we are all familiar as the pioneer of the introduction of Magnitsky sanctions worldwide; the former member of the Japanese Parliament, Shiori Kanno; and the former British consul general, as my right hon. Friend mentioned.

Layla Moran: I want to add my admiration for all those who have been sanctioned, including the hon. Member and other Members of this House, because they choose to speak out; we ask ourselves what more we can do so that we can join that list. Does it not stick in the hon. Member's throat that the Chief Executive, John Lee, has yet to be sanctioned by this Government in any way? Bill Browder himself has called for Magnitsky-style sanctions on him. Is this not the time?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is leaping ahead. If she will exercise a little patience, I will come to endorse entirely that point, and beef it up a bit.

In response to those being named in the trial, six patrons of Hong Kong Watch—including other fellow sanctionees Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws and Lord Alton of Liverpool—wrote to the Foreign Secretary, urging him to take action, and calling on the UK Government to implement Magnitsky-style sanctions on the Hong Kong Chief Executive, John Lee, including asset freezes and a travel ban; the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) was very prescient. To quote Lord Alton,

“It is simply an assertion of Chinese Communist Party authoritarianism. It makes a mockery of the rule of law. The only conspiracy is that which is being organised by opponents of justice, democracy and human rights. This show trial should be ended forthwith, and the UK Government should say so loud and clear.”

To add to that, the Minister will know that two British citizens are named conspirators with Jimmy Lai on his third charge of colluding with foreign forces to undermine national security. Those citizens are Bill Browder and Luke de Pulford. To my knowledge, this is the first time that foreign citizens have been formally connected to a national security law offence in Hong Kong. Legal advice that I have seen is that this means the prosecution in Jimmy Lai's case wish to make those British nationals criminally culpable. That being the case, why has the UK not said anything about it yet? Perhaps when she comes to respond, the Minister can specifically address that point.

I have several asks of the Government, as put forward by some of those who have briefed us. First, we call on the Government to continue to reaffirm their support for Jimmy Lai and urge the Prime Minister to call for Jimmy Lai's immediate and unconditional release. It would be nice for the Prime Minister to say that loudly and openly in reference specifically to Jimmy Lai. Secondly, the UK Government should swiftly issue a strong statement in response to the Hong Kong Government's targeting those three British citizens—Benedict Rogers, Luke de Pulford and Bill Browder—during the trial. Thirdly, the UK Government should implement Magnitsky-style targeted sanctions on Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee, including asset freezes and a travel ban to protect Hongkongers in Britain and around the world. Fourthly, the British Government should urge like-minded Governments to specifically mention the case of Jimmy Lai in their recommendations to China at today's periodic review.

There has been another outrage that completely undermines all the principles of international law involving those who have fled to the UK for safe haven from Hong Kong: the use of bounties on pro-democracy activists—a particular affront to international law. On 14 December 2023, the Hong Kong Government issued arrest warrants for five exiled Hong Kongers who now live and advocate for democracy in the US or the UK, with bounties of 1 million Hong Kong dollars. Among those five is 33-year-old Simon Cheng, who founded Hongkongers in Britain, the largest UK-wide Hong Kong diaspora organisation. He is charged with allegedly inciting secession and collusion between August 2020 and June 2022. Those five arrest warrants followed the arrest warrants and bounties issued for eight overseas Hong Kong pro-democracy activists in July 2023. Those warrants were condemned by Hong Kong Watch, as were the many instances of the Hong Kong Government targeting their families and colleagues in Hong Kong.

They also target families beyond the borders of China and Hong Kong, which is particularly chilling. We have seen examples where they freely intimidate families of those people who have escaped from Hong Kong, even on the streets of the United Kingdom.

In response to the issuance of the arrest warrants and bounties in December 2023, the Foreign Secretary said:

“I have instructed officials in Hong Kong, Beijing and London to raise this issue as a matter of urgency with the Hong Kong and Chinese authorities.

We will not tolerate any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass or harm individuals or communities in the UK. This is a threat to our democracy and fundamental human rights.”

Hear, hear! I entirely welcome those words, but what is being done about it? The Chinese understand only the threat of actions with consequences, and that is the problem. Tough words do not usually cut the mustard with China, unless there is a reasonable expectation that those tough words will lead to consequences, and we need to see consequences.

I again have some asks of the British Government. Following the welcome statements that I have just quoted, the British Government should press the Hong Kong authorities to withdraw immediately the 13 arrest warrants with bounties on Hongkongers in the UK, the US and Australia. Secondly, will the Government introduce measures to protect the rights and freedoms of Hong Kong activists in exile, particularly those who have been granted asylum and have faced past and current threats from Beijing? Thirdly, will the Government urge like-minded Governments to suspend the remaining extradition treaties between democracies and the Hong Kong and Chinese Governments, and work towards co-ordinating an Interpol early warning system to protect Hongkongers and other dissidents abroad who may fall within the tentacles of the Chinese authorities? Fourthly, will the British Government urge like-minded Governments to raise these arrest warrants and bounties again at the periodic review, which is happening today?

Again, we have seen no sign of sanctions against any Hong Kong officials, while seven parliamentary colleagues, including myself and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green, remain sanctioned. We now hear that the Foreign Secretary wants to visit Hong Kong. The last Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), went to China and took up the case of Jimmy Lai, and the case of those of us who are sanctioned, but I am afraid came back with nothing. So quite why the new Foreign Secretary thinks that he wants to go to China—and presumably will take up the case again—and can come back with something, I do not know. Surely there are other platforms available to him, where he can make those calls on China without having to go and be seen to be paying court to the Chinese Communist Government in Beijing.

The Hong Kong Government's Security Bureau recently put forward article 23 of the Basic Law to be discussed by the Legislative Council within its 2024 session. It is highly likely that that locally legislated national security provision will be passed and implemented by the end of this year. Article 23 aims to

“prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organisations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organisations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organisations or bodies.”

Since the enactment of the Hong Kong national security law, which was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China in 2020, these draconian laws have devastated the civil society and caused widespread chilling effects among the people of Hong Kong. This will only make that worse and embed it in the tyranny that is now engulfing Hong Kong.

I will briefly touch on the question of the financial pressures that the Chinese Government are bringing on Hongkongers. The Mandatory Provident Fund is a compulsory retirement savings scheme for the people of Hong Kong. For most Hongkongers it is their main pension pot, as the state pension is very low. Hongkongers can withdraw their entire MPF savings only if they make a declaration that they have departed Hong Kong permanently, with no intention of returning.

However, the Mandatory Provident Fund Authority, which governs the MPF, stated in 2021 that, because the BNO—or British national overseas—passport was no longer recognised as a valid travel document, those trying to withdraw MPF funds early could not use the BNO passport as proof of identity. As a result, BNO visa holders who leave Hong Kong continue to be denied access to their pension savings.

That is a punitive action by the Hong Kong Government, and Hong Kong Watch estimates that Hongkongers who fled to the UK on the BNO visa are being denied access to some £2.2 billion in savings. HSBC, headquartered in London, holds around 30% of the total value of all MPF schemes, and it is estimated that HSBC is currently withholding £660 million in savings from Hongkongers with BNO status who now live in the UK.

That is an official status recognised by the UK Government for those legitimately coming to seek safe refuge in the UK, and a company that is headquartered in the UK, and is subject to UK corporate and other laws, is withholding money from its rightful pensioners. The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation needs to decide which side it is on—freedom and liberty and the international rule of law, or kowtowing to the tyrants who now have their footprints all over Hong Kong. Therefore, financial measures are just another way that the Chinese Communist Government are imprinting their tyranny on Hong Kong.

You will be relieved to hear that I have almost come to an end, Mr Twigg, but I have just some other examples of where we really must stand up to what the Chinese Government are doing. Yesterday, Ms Choi Yuk-lin, the Secretary for Education in Hong Kong, began her official visit to the United Kingdom and Finland. That official trip comes despite the UK Government's acknowledgment that Hong Kong's national security law, passed in 2020, is a direct violation of the 1984 Sino-British joint declarations—fine for the words, but again, where are the consequences?

Ms Choi Yuk-lin is known for her public support of the national security law. She has consistently asserted that post-secondary education institutions, including their staff and students, are bound by the law. However, under her watch the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union—Hong Kong's largest teachers' union, with more than 95,000 members and representing 90% of the profession—was disbanded in 2021 after coming under

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fire in the Chinese state media. Mark Sabah, the director of the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, said:

“This is yet another example of the British Government seemingly ignoring all the violations of the Sino-British Declaration and all the attacks on free speech in Hong Kong and inviting a Hong Kong Government official to the UK, while a British citizen, Jimmy Lai, still sits in jail on spurious National Security Law charges”

and we remain sanctioned. He went on to say:

“There is no chance that Ms Choi is here to support Hong Kong students when she is personally responsible for tearing down academic freedom in Hong Kong across schools and university Campuses.”

She is not the first representative of the Chinese Government to be welcomed here in London, I am afraid, with the acquiescence of Ministers. I will not embarrass the Minister responding today by mentioning another photo opportunity, which she was involved with, by a particularly dodgy member of the Chinese Government responsible effectively for kidnapping the protesters and dissidents and taking them back to China to face unfair trials.

As we speak and as I have said, the universal periodic review of China is happening. However, the point is, will China take any notice? This is the first time it has happened since 2018. It is a unique process at the United Nations, whereby every single member state is scrutinised for its human rights record every four to five years. China's last UPR was in 2018 and, as we know, a lot has happened since then; the problem is that it is not good. Since the last UPR, no region of the People's Republic of China has changed more dramatically, significantly or rapidly for the worse than Hong Kong. Since 2018, it has transformed from one of Asia's most open societies to one of its most repressive police states. It has gone from having a legislature with a significant number of elected pro-democracy members to a place where many of those legislators are now in jail; the entire pro-democracy camp is completely excluded from contesting any elections and both the legislature and the district councils are filled with pro-Beijing quislings, making them nothing more than puppet rubber stamps that are subsidiaries of the National People's Congress. We have had the “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism” against the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims since the last review. We have had the huge roll-out of surveillance technology since the last review. It has not responded to the criticisms in 2018 on women's rights, where China failed to stem the trafficking of women and girls, including those from neighbouring countries. There has been a crackdown on freedom of expression, as we have heard. China received 346 recommendations from 150 countries back in 2018. It accepted 284 of them, but questionably many were just noted as accepted and already implemented—of course they were not.

Last week, the Minister responding today sent all colleagues a letter marked, “Dear colleague...A Year in Sanctions”. She started by saying:

“This Government has broken new ground on sanctions in 2023, continuing to lead the international effort to ratchet up pressure on Putin's war machine, whilst deploying the UK's autonomous powers in response to serious human rights violations and abuses, cyber attacks and serious corruption across the world.”

It is a good record. It talks about Russia; it talks about sanctions for metals and diamonds and for oil; it talks about reconstruction efforts in Ukraine and who will pay for them. It talks about Hamas, Iran and cyber. Nowhere in this four-page letter does it mention the subject of China or Hong Kong or any possibility of sanctions against that country.

Many petitions to this place have been responded to by the Government. On 7 June 2021, there was a petition to sanction Hong Kong officials responsible for human rights violations, to which the official Government response was:

“We carefully consider sanctions designations. It is not appropriate to speculate who may be designated in the future or we risk reducing the impact of the designations.”

In January 2022, there was a petition urging Hong Kong to release all political prisoners. The Government responded:

“As a co-signatory to the Joint Declaration, we will continue to stand up for the people of Hong Kong, to call out the violation of their freedoms, and to hold China to their international obligations.”

How exactly? In August 2023 there was a petition to sanction individuals responsible for Sino-British joint declaration breaches in Hong Kong. The response sounds familiar:

“We keep all sanctions designations under close and regular review. We do not speculate about future sanctions designations, as to do so could reduce their impact.”

The problem is: there are no consequences. I started my rather too lengthy words speaking about our particular interest and obligation to defend the liberties and lives of the people in Hong Kong that we once had responsibility for directly. We have sanctioned people from across the world, most notably Russia, for their blatant warmongering, corruption and other issues. All of the crimes against humanity, the international rule of law, freedom, liberty and democracy are being waged in Hong Kong as we speak, yet not a single person in the Chinese Government in Hong Kong has been subject to any sanction by the Government.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Does my hon. Friend not also find it peculiar that Britain, which is the co-signatory of the agreement, has not sanctioned any of the officials responsible for the national security law, which he referred to, whereas the United States, which is not a signatory and has no historical link to Hong Kong, has sanctioned 10 of the most senior people? Does that not seem peculiar?

Tim Loughton: It is not just peculiar; it is outrageous. We have good examples of where the States has not only talked tough but followed it through with consequences and I think gets greater respect from the Chinese authorities because it is likely to do something about it. There is no excuse for us not taking an equally robust stance against the Chinese Communist party Government if we share those values and ideals of liberty, democracy and freedom that those brave people in Hong Kong have had to stand up for in the most outrageous of circumstances.

The future of human rights in Hong Kong is not bright. We have a duty not just to point that out, but to make it clear to China that if they do not get their act together there will be consequences, and the British Government will make sure that they are made to pay and are called out for this outrageous intimidation of the citizens of Hong Kong and their flouting of the international legal obligations that we all take for granted.

Several hon. Members rose—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. If Members keep their speeches to around seven and a half or eight minutes we will get everybody in.

3.7 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I will certainly pay attention to your time limit. So much has already been said. In the past that would not stop us repeating it, but I will underline it rather than repeat it. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has made an excellent contribution.

I want to make two or three points. I agree with everything that my hon. Friend has said. It seems rather depressing that we have been here so many times in this Chamber and the main Chamber to debate this subject. It is worth underlining my hon. Friend's point that in all the debates until today we have struggled to get the British Government to recognise that Jimmy Lai is a British citizen. He has never held a Chinese passport and arrived in Hong Kong as a minor. The Chinese Government shifted its policy around and claimed that he held dual nationality. Up until the last two or three weeks, the British Government went along with the Chinese charade of calling him a dual citizen. He has never been a dual citizen. He was proud of his British passport. He stayed in Hong Kong rather than fleeing, proud, as he said, that he would have the protections of his British passport. Sadly, he was badly let down. I just want to underline what my hon. Friend said on that.

I want to talk about the human rights abuses in Hong Kong, particularly what has happened in the last few weeks. The naming of British citizens as co-conspirators marks the first time that the Hong Kong authorities have sought to incriminate foreign nationals under the national security law. I intervened on that, but it is worth stressing again. I simply cannot understand why, after the former British consul general was named, the Foreign Office has said nothing about this individual, nor has it said to China that it had no right to do that, as he was going about his lawful business as a diplomat. Nothing has been said by the Foreign Office. I have even asked the Foreign Secretary to come out and say something strong in defence of the employee—the consul general—but we have had no statement or attack on the Chinese Government about him being named in this case. I find that astonishing. I urge the Minister to make it clear now that the Chinese Government have no right to do as they have.

The second point relates to the naming of those who have worked with us, from Luke de Pulford, Benedict Rogers, IPAC Hong Kong and the Japanese politician Shiori Yamao to Bill Browder, who has never had any contact with Jimmy Lai, so that is astonishing. I will not go into the details, as I am sure that will come out later on. The reality is that these people have been named on the basis of spurious links, and that is a problem. Thanks to *The Washington Post*, we know now that Andy Li, one of the individuals who is to give testimony—against Jimmy Lai, sadly—did voluntary work for IPAC on building a website. *The Washington Post* has been very clear about his mistreatment in Shenzhen prison, including credible allegations of torture. We can therefore understand that what he may or will say should almost certainly be expunged, for the simple reason that he was under duress.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I apologise for not being present at the beginning, Mr Twigg. As I explained to you, I was paying tribute to Tony Lloyd in the main Chamber and I could not get here in time.

Jimmy Lai is not just a high-profile person, but a high-profile Roman Catholic. His religion and beliefs are important to him. Whenever there are attacks on Jimmy Lai, there are also attacks on his religious belief, as with Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we cannot ignore the suppression of religious freedom in Hong Kong?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I completely agree. The hon. Gentleman knows well that the Chinese Government have been oppressive of Christian Churches and the Falun Gong, and we know what is going on with the genocide among the Uyghur, a Muslim Turkic group. All of this is dangerous. I come back to the simple question that I put to the Catholic Church: what is its arrangement with the Chinese Government, which it has refused to publish, and why, as a senior Christian Church, did it not offer more protections to the other Christian Churches? That is a big question, which the Vatican could answer by publishing its agreement, which it refuses to do.

I know that the Minister will not want to speculate about sanctions. I simply note that the US Government, who have no real historical links with Hong Kong, have sanctioned a significant number of people, whereas the reality is that we have sanctioned nobody in Hong Kong—none of the officials who we know have trashed the Sino-British agreement and upturned the whole idea of democracy, and are persecuting peaceful democracy campaigners. All that, yet there are still no sanctions in place for any of the officials who exercised that power and continue to do so.

I now wish to ask a question of the Minister. I say this very carefully: I have heard that the UK Government may be going further backwards on this matter, and that it may now be British Government policy that the Foreign Office of the UK Government has taken the decision neither to nominate nor to further sanction any Chinese officials. I will be grateful if the Minister, from the Dispatch Box, makes it very clear whether that is correct. Have we now an official policy that there will be no further pressure on China over sanctions of officials, or is that untrue and incorrect? I would be grateful if she made that very clear to us all.

The other element, which is wholly relevant and a real problem, is whether the Government have made representations with regard to the mistreatment of the witnesses in this case, leading also to torture. Have they made any representations at all about the way they have been treated, other than the statement made by the Minister for Security with regard to the naming of British citizens?

Finally, will the Minister state clearly that, if Interpol came under pressure from the Chinese Government to do something under Interpol's rules in relation to the British citizens China has named—to require their presence, or to require the British Government or others to secure them themselves pending any expedition arrangements, or to do whatever China wishes—the British Government would refuse any co-operation whatsoever with Interpol, because those citizens were named incorrectly? I would like that to be clear, because many of them are now worried that if the British Government do not make that clear, here and now, they may face other pressures that would be insurmountable and unsupportable.

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

In line with what you said, Mr Twigg, I will come to a close and let others speak. I want to say one thing very clearly: we have banged on and on about the failure in Hong Kong, the terrible abuses, and the British judges now working under the ridiculous farrago of the national security law but pretending that common law somehow still rules. Other countries have done far more to make things clear. America has even issued a booklet to all its businesses to say that, now that the national security law is here, the English common law that now exists in Hong Kong will no longer protect them in any way. We have done nothing on that. I have urged the Government to tell British businesses to be very careful when they do business through Hong Kong, but we have not done that yet. I would be grateful if the Government did that now, after all the arbitrary detentions and the final attempt to get Jimmy Lai named as a British citizen, which at last we have done.

This is a terrible problem. China is determined to take on the rest of the democratic world. It believes its form of government and its abuses are the right way to run a country. It is now in league with North Korea, Russia, and Iran. We see its hand and those of its allies undermining democracy and peace all over the world now. If we do not face up to that and recognise that it is just the beginning of what we will have to deal with, that will be an abject failure of British foreign policy.

3.17 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I will be brief. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), not only on securing this debate, but on his powerful and excellent speech, which brought home everything that needs to be said about this issue. I will not repeat it.

My hon. Friend mentioned that 182,000 or so Hongkongers have come to the UK under the BNO visa. Over the last few years, some 4,000 have come to Sutton, because it is a borough open to communities fleeing either democracy-related oppression or conflict. For example, some 25 or 30 years ago, Tamils made their home in south-west London because of the civil war in Sri Lanka. These people came to Sutton because of the schools and because it is a great place to bring up families—being half Burmese, I always talk about the Asian equation: good family networks, great education and hard work bring the best chance of prosperity—but also because there is a sense of community.

I pay tribute to Richard Choi, who drove a lot of that movement. He surveyed many Hongkongers deciding to go to London and asked them about what they wanted, where they were going to settle, and what kind of housing, schools and businesses they wanted. I have been watching Sutton Bei Bei on YouTube, an influencer who talks about the wi-fi speeds in Sutton flats, parks, and those kinds of things. They buy their food from SMart Oriental, a supermarket at the top of the high street, and eat at a business run by a new Hongkonger at the bottom of the high street. However, it is not about all those fantastic things. It is about the contrast between what they find in the UK and what they have just left in Hong Kong.

On 5 August 2023, the Hongkongers got together in Sutton library for a children's workshop named after "Sheep Village", a series of books. The five authors of

those books were jailed in 2022 for 19 months each. They were really worried at the time, because of social media posts by former Hong Kong chief executive Leung Chun-ying, who was making pointed comments from the other side of the world. We did not take photos, out of respect for their safety, but the fact that that event was allowed to go ahead quite happily that day for those children and their families; the fact that I could speak to the Minister, to the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), and to the Minister for Security; and the fact that the Hongkongers could speak to their democratic representatives—all these things were very important. I brought some of the Hongkongers here for a tour, and as we got close to the doors of the Public Gallery, which were open to the Chamber, one of the more elderly members of the group was in tears because the fact that he was so close to the Dispatch Box watching the proceedings of this open democracy, had had a tour from his Member of Parliament and could have an open exchange with him was in such contrast to what he had seen his homeland descend into.

It is really important that we continue to speak about this. This year is the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Sino-British declaration. That is a lifetime ago for some people, although not for me. It came into effect in 1997, so there are still 33 years to go, but it is clear that it is just not lasting the distance, following the adoption of the national security law in June 2020 by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in Beijing. The declaration made it clear that the Hongkongers' high degree of autonomy, rights and freedoms at that time would remain unchanged for 50 years, but that has just not happened. The national security law been used as a tool to curtail freedoms and punish dissent rather than to keep public order, as is its stated intention. That means that, for all the stories we have heard—the alternative voices, whether they are in the media, like Jimmy Lai, or the Hong Kong 47—all the sham trials are curtailing democracy and silencing voices. We have heard about the economic, social and population impact on Hong Kong. What is left is basically conformity, and I suppose, in post-cultural revolution China, conformity is effectively all they have.

I am glad that the trial of Jimmy Lai has rightly caught the attention of special rapporteurs of the special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council, the largest body of independent experts in the UN human rights system, because it is important that we mobilise the international community. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham is absolutely right that it is really important that we lead on this, as the UK Government and UK parliamentarians with a special responsibility and duty of care, given our past relationship with Hong Kong.

I want to pay tribute to someone who is leading on this. We have mentioned several advocates, but I make special mention of Hong Kong Watch and of Benedict Rogers in particular. It was no surprise to me when Benedict Rogers co-founded Hong Kong Watch. We have known each other a long time. I travelled to Burma with him—as I said, I am half-Burmese—and having seen the work he did there, I am not surprised that he has brought the same zeal, dedication and moral outrage to the crusade and campaign on Hong Kong. I absolutely condemn what he has had to suffer, with the attempt to

traduce his reputation here in the UK. Whether it is harassing his neighbours and his family or targeting him at a previous Conservative party conference, as we have heard, such things should not be happening on UK streets in this country. We absolutely have to act.

The Minister will rightly say what the Government have done about Hong Kong. Members have asked, as I will, about what the Government should be doing. The fact that the Government extended the UK's arms embargo on mainland China to Hong Kong soon after the imposition of the national security law, that they suspended the UK's extradition treaty with Hong Kong, that they introduced a new immigration path for BNO passport holders to make the UK, including Sutton, their home, and that the Foreign Secretary brought in the Chinese ambassador in the formal diplomatic démarche on 13 July are all to be welcomed. But we will always take a slightly different approach from the US, because we have a different relationship with China in relation to trade. Our soft-diplomacy approach to China is important, but we have heard why we must act now and look at sanctions. I also make a plea for us to call out the mandatory provident fund issue, because the Hongkongers who have settled here need to be able to settle themselves economically as well.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople just before 25 minutes to 4. I call Fiona Bruce.

3.25 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, and in particular to have heard the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), which I can only describe as statesmanlike.

To the casual observer, freedom of religion or belief may appear to be the one freedom still standing in Hong Kong. Although Hongkongers are no longer free to protest or publish what they wish to in the media or online, as basic freedoms of expression, association, assembly and the press have been stripped away, they are at least still free to go to church. In mainland China, the sinicization of religion means that religion must align with the Communist party's values. That has led to places of worship being shut down, destroyed or desecrated, crosses being destroyed, Chinese Communist party propaganda banners being placed alongside religious imagery, surveillance cameras being placed at the altar, under-18s being prohibited from going to places of worship at all, and clergy being arrested and jailed. In Hong Kong, at least, places of worship are still open.

Beneath the surface, however, it is clear that freedom of religion or belief is under threat—indeed, in its true sense, is already being stealthily restricted. As Ambassador Brownback and I state in a foreword to a recent report, “‘Sell Out My Soul’: The Impending Threats to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Hong Kong”,

“Freedom of religion or belief is about so much more than simply the right to go to a place of worship once a week... It is, as expressed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a fully-fledged expression of conscience.

Interpreted in this way, this basic and fundamental human right is clearly under increasing and intensifying threat in Hong Kong”.

Jim Shannon: One of the examples of where attacks on FORB are unfolding in Hong Kong is education. Nearly 60% of Government-funded schools in Hong Kong are Church run, and they are now under the control of Beijing, which promotes its propaganda in the curriculum. Does the hon. Lady agree that believers can practise their faith only in name rather than in essence? Beijing controls religious freedom in Hong Kong by exerting total control over Churches, without closing them. That is the reality in Hong Kong.

Fiona Bruce: It is indeed, and if time permits I will go into more detail on that point.

I join others in paying tribute to Ben Rogers, who ably researched and drafted the “Sell Out My Soul” report. In a sense, it is inevitable that freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong has been undermined, for two reasons. First, when freedom itself is dismantled, sooner or later religious freedom is impacted. All the basic rights set out in the universal declaration of human rights are interlinked and interdependent. We cannot have freedom of religion or belief without the freedoms of expression, association and assembly, and elsewhere I have argued that FORB is fundamental to all those freedoms. Secondly, like any autocratic regime, the CCP has always been inherently hostile to religion and has sought over the years to eradicate, suppress, control or co-opt religion, so it was inevitable that, as it exerted greater direct control over Hong Kong, undermining the high degree of autonomy set out in the one country, two systems principle, freedom of religion or belief would come under increasing pressure.

The campaign against religious freedom in Hong Kong is one of slow, subtle suffocation rather than sudden, dramatic crackdown. However, although the threats may be subtle, for those who have eyes to see, they are clear. Yes, people can still go to places of worship and access religious literature, but since the introduction of the draconian national security law in July 2020 and the climate of fear surrounding it, with almost all of Hong Kong's other basic civil liberties—freedom of expression, association, assembly and so on—having been dismantled, inevitably there is a knock-on impact on religious freedom. It has created a chill factor, leading believers to keep quiet about their faith in public, and religious leaders themselves to make compromises, including widespread self-censorship by clergy in their sermons.

I will give some examples. In August 2020, Cardinal John Tong, apostolic administrator of the Hong Kong Catholic diocese at the time, instructed all Catholic priests to “watch your language” when preaching and to avoid “political” issues. A Protestant pastor, who has now left Hong Kong, claims that his church has removed all his sermons from the past 30 years from its website. Many churches no longer share sermons online. At least three prominent pastors have been arrested in Hong Kong. The most well-known case was the arrest of Hong Kong's 91-year-old bishop emeritus, Cardinal Joseph Zen, in May 2022. Then there was Pastor Garry Pang, convicted of sedition and sentenced to a year in jail, and Pastor Alan Keung Ka-wai, arrested in January last year for producing and selling a book that was allegedly seditious. Arguably, all those cases relate to political rather than religious activities, but those individuals were acting according to their consciences, informed and inspired by their faith.

[Fiona Bruce]

We see religious freedom threatened in other ways. Charity laws have been tightened. The US State Department's 2022 report on international religious freedom noted:

"Religious groups may register as a society, a tax-exempt organization, or both".

However, with reference to organisations seeking tax exemption, it added:

"Government tax regulations provide that any group, including religious groups, involved in activities deemed to endanger national security would not be recognized as a charitable organization."

The message is clear.

An issue of even more concern is how church-run schools in the education sector are a particular target for the Chinese Communist party's stealthy undermining of religious freedom. As one religious scholar observed:

"The CCP knows very well that in order to control a state, the first step is to control the mind[s] of young children."

In Hong Kong, only a small percentage of Government-funded schools are actually Government run. As we have heard, the majority—at least 60%—are run by religious groups. Under the Basic Law, those schools must adhere to a curriculum that ensures that the CCP's ideological narratives feature prominently. The crackdown on freedom of expression resulting from the national security law began to impact Hong Kong's church-run schools almost immediately. In August 2020, the Hong Kong Catholic diocese issued a letter to the principals of all Catholic primary and secondary schools, urging them to enhance students' awareness of the new national security legislation and the national anthem law, and cultivate "correct values" on national identity.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Front Benchers will have roughly eight minutes each. I call the SNP spokesperson.

3.33 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank you, Mr Twigg, and the Minister for understanding that I will have to leave early to attend a Holocaust Memorial Day event in Parliament. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, and I thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing the debate and for the way in which he opened it. I also want to put on record my appreciation of Hong Kong Watch, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Federation of Journalists and all those who do so much to defend human rights and democracy in Hong Kong under enormous pressure.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that today's debate has united Members on both sides of the House in support of the people of Hong Kong, their democratic institutions and their fundamental human rights. They have enjoyed these human rights for years: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the right to strike, the freedom to travel, the freedom of association and, as we have just heard from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—and, indeed, as we heard earlier from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—freedom of religion or belief.

Everyone who has spoken has noted how the 1984 Sino-British declaration promised the people of Hong Kong that they would

"enjoy a high degree of autonomy"

for 50 years after the handover to China. They were also told that their lifestyle, rights and freedoms—everything they enjoyed—would remain intact and unchanged for half a century after 1997. We are little more than halfway through the 50 years that were guaranteed, but those basic freedoms and those human rights that they were assured of have become a distant memory. Lord Patten's famously optimistic line was:

"Now, Hong Kong people are to run Hong Kong."

Sadly, that could not be further from the truth.

Although we recognise that 1997 was an important step in global decolonisation, we deeply regret that, contrary to what was promised to the people of Hong Kong in a legally binding international agreement, the Chinese Communist party has completely reneged on its end of the deal. The steady erosion of personal and political freedoms has now become a full-on assault, as the Beijing Government, through the passage of the insidious national security law, embarks on a draconian programme of assimilation and integration of Hong Kong into the Chinese mainstream. As the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, that completely dismantles, once and for all, the notion of there being one country, two systems.

We have heard that national security laws were passed in June 2020 in response to huge pro-democracy protests. That crackdown has led to a mass exodus of people. Although those laws are specifically designed to criminalise secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign organisations, they have effectively stripped away freedom of expression and peaceful protest, and extinguished Hong Kong's independent free press, turning Hong Kong, in just four years, from being one of the most open cities in Asia to one of the most repressive.

Those national security laws are designed to create doubt and ambiguity in the minds of the people as to whether what they are doing—indeed, what they have always done—could now be considered a criminal act. The only people who know what the law actually means are the people who make it, and there is a deliberate fug of ambiguity and confusion about what actually constitutes an offence that would endanger national security. That fug of ambiguity has had the desired effect because, as we have heard today, dozens of civil society organisations and trade unions, as well as the independent press, disbanded and shut down, for fear of falling foul of a law that they simply do not understand.

Every speaker today has talked about the most high-profile victim of these national security laws, Jimmy Lai. The 76-year-old UK national is a citizen standing trial on three charges under these laws and faces a further charge of conspiracy to publish seditious literature. Since his arrest in 2020, Mr Lai, a strident and fearless pro-democracy activist, has been held in solitary confinement and has now spent more than 1,200 days in prison. This political show trial of a long-time critic of the Chinese Communist party started early last month, and he faces life imprisonment. We must prepare ourselves, because it is a question of when, not if, he is found guilty. That is because, not surprisingly, there is a 100% conviction rate under the national security laws. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who is no longer in his place, for raising the issue of former UK judges giving legitimacy to such a repressive regime and a system that has no legitimacy.

Amnesty International's deputy regional director, Sarah Brooks, has said:

"Jimmy Lai is the most high-profile public figure prosecuted under Hong Kong's National Security Law, and the world will be watching."

She added:

"The prosecution of Jimmy Lai shows how Hong Kong's repressive National Security Law is being used to stifle press freedom and crush civil society."

She is right that the world will be watching.

The International Federation of Journalists has said that the use of these laws

"and archaic sedition legislation to silence critical and independent voices in Hong Kong must cease",

and has called for all such charges to be dropped.

Even the United Nations has expressed deep concern about what it sees as an inextricable link between Jimmy Lai's outspoken, pro-democracy criticism of the Chinese Government and his arrest and the show trial. It is clear that Beijing and Hong Kong are orchestrating an assault on the free press and freedom of expression. Jimmy Lai's trial epitomises that rapid decline in the rule of law in Hong Kong.

In 2022, I described in this Chamber the situation in Hong Kong as grim. Sadly, it is even more grim today and there is little prospect of it getting better any time soon. In that debate two years ago, I and every other speaker raised the issue of the Magnitsky sanctions, asking the Government why, despite the flagrant breach of human rights law, no senior Hong Kong official had been sanctioned. That question is relevant today and I ask it again. What is the point of having the ability to sanction those who flout international law if we are not prepared to use it? If the ripping up of an international treaty, a crackdown on the free press, a curtailment of civil liberties, a full-on attack on democracy and the imprisonment and potential jailing for life of a UK national cannot bring the Government to use Magnitsky-style sanctions, the question must be: what would it take?

3.41 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) not just on his work on Hong Kong but on his important work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Tibet and for highlighting the issues of freedom of religion or belief there. I must also reference my position as a founding member and ongoing patron of Hong Kong Watch and pay tribute, as many others have today, to the important work of Benedict Rogers and the team.

As I have said each time we have debated this subject in the House, the situation in Hong Kong is far removed from the liberties promised to the people of Hong Kong in the legally binding Sino-British agreement on the return of Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Back then, China was emerging as a global economic power with dreams of a more hopeful century ahead, and the enshrined rights and liberties that Hong Kong was to enjoy for a full 50 years were the bedrock upon which the territory's success would be built. Many Hongkongers understood, with the handing back of Hong Kong, that these vital freedoms they had under British rule would continue. A vibrant free press, the right of assembly and the promise of a more democratic electoral system were all in the

minds of Hongkongers as the safeguard through which they could continue living their lives much as they had before. Sadly, as hon. Members have said today, that is no longer the case. It is sobering to hear that Hong Kong, like Myanmar, has dropped down Freedom House's list of countries in relation to freedoms across the board.

I will dig into some of those matters. The Minister has received a letter from a number of Members of Parliament. What assessment has the FCDO made of the bounty on the heads of, and the threats made against, people just carrying out their conscience here in the UK and asking questions about human rights? I have written to the Minister on that question, as have many in the House, and I look forward to her reply, both verbally and in writing when her officials have time to pull up that draft. It is important we follow each and every one of the developments on the crucial question of freedoms for Hongkongers.

The Foreign Office ought to be doing important work with the Home Office. We were all extremely concerned when we saw the attack outside the consulate in Manchester in the autumn of 2022. Following that, allegations were made against dissidents here in the UK, and now allies of Hongkongers are being attacked. What assessment has the Minister made, together with the Security Minister at the Home Office, of the important work that Whitehall should be doing across Departments?

I thank the Minister and her officials for the reply to my recent written question about BNO passport holders being denied mandatory provident funds—in effect, a pension. I am grateful to her for confirming that the matter has previously been raised with Chinese and Hong Kong officials, but has she raised it since May 2023? That is the most recent date on which she raised it, and it is quite a long time ago. Is she continuing to raise it and being relentless? This is a very long-term relationship and it is important that we do not give up.

There also remains a key need for the UK to engage with partners on the global stage to provide sanctuary for Hongkongers. Will the Minister outline what specific discussions she has had on Hong Kong with her US, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and European counterparts? For those who remain in Hong Kong and for the city itself, there is more that we can do.

The case of Jimmy Lai and the questions around freedom of expression have been given a thorough going-over by the first speaker, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, and it was mentioned by all others. I was very pleased that, in today's statement from Geneva, the key official mentioned Jimmy Lai, this time in dispatches, which I am very pleased about. Even Lord Cameron has mentioned this important case. This is a key moment because the case is before the courts. Could the Minister tell me whether the Prime Minister will now raise it? It is a matter of sending this up the hierarchical tree and, now that we seem to have won the argument with the Foreign Office and the new Foreign Secretary, it would be good if we could get the Prime Minister to mention it as part of his important foreign policy work. It was great to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) raising the case of Jimmy Lai because it would really help if many Members met his son Sebastien and continue to raise the case.

[Catherine West]

I will now conclude my remarks and give the Minister time to wind up. I want to ask the Minister for her views on some of the points raised in this debate. What assessment has the Foreign Office made of restrictions on trade union membership, including the teachers' union? What assessment has the Foreign Office made of the particular impact on women and girls? Of the 17,000 political prisoners—a frightening number—how many are women? What issues does the Minister believe we need to be aware of in relation to those political prisoners? Finally, what is her assessment of the periodic review of human rights in relation to China, which is ongoing in Geneva right now? Does she believe that it has been a very good conversation at the UN today, and what actions will come out of the periodic review?

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): We are tight on time, but it would be helpful if the Minister could leave a minute or so at the end for Mr Loughton to wind up. [Interruption.] He says he is happy not to wind up, so you have a free rein, Minister.

3.48 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this important debate and for his characteristically powerful and challenging speech on this issue. I welcome the contributions of all right hon. and hon. Members. I will do my best to respond in the time remaining, using the information that I have brought with me. I commit to writing in response to those issues that I am not able to cover today.

China committed to uphold the Sino-British joint declaration until at least 2047. This treaty set out many of Hong Kong's human rights or, to use the language of the joint declaration, "rights and freedoms". However, as colleagues have articulated so clearly and forcefully, the national security law, introduced in 2020, has irretrievably damaged Hong Kong's promised rights and freedoms. Freedom of speech, assembly and the press have deteriorated dramatically.

When Beijing imposed this law in 2020, the authorities promised it would be used exceptionally and that it would target only a small number of criminals. Instead, the law has been applied far beyond genuine national security concerns. The Hong Kong authorities have used it to target critics across society time and again. They have prosecuted pro-democracy campaigners, journalists and community leaders. The vague provisions of the law have created a culture of self-censorship, as a number of colleagues have highlighted, restricting Hong Kong's extraordinary vibrancy.

The high degree of autonomy promised in the joint declaration has also been compromised by an overhaul of electoral systems, which has meant that Hongkongers are no longer legitimately represented, and meaningful political opposition has been all but eliminated. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) set out how powerfully that is understood by those who have been able to come here and see what a democracy still in full flight looks like.

The Foreign Secretary has called on the Chinese authorities to repeal the national security law, and to end the prosecution of all individuals charged under it. The UK made clear our strong opposition to the national security law immediately, declaring its imposition a further breach of the joint declaration. We took robust action as soon as the national security law came into force, including by creating our bespoke visa route for British nationals overseas—an avenue for those who wish to leave the city. To date we have granted more than 184,000 visas, and that door remains open.

We suspended the UK-Hong Kong extradition treaty indefinitely, and extended to Hong Kong the arms embargo that has applied to mainland China since 1989. We continue to alert British nationals and businesses to the impact of the national security law and the risk that it poses through our travel advice and overseas business risk guidance on gov.uk. That is kept under close review. We always try to signpost everyone to it, so that they are fully aware of the realities.

Colleagues have reiterated today the strength of their feeling about the imposition of sanctions on those responsible for the erosion of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong. I continue to listen closely to those views, as do my officials, and we will continue to consider designations under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020.

As colleagues know, I appreciate the frustration, but we do not speculate about future designations, as that could reduce their impact. However, I can confirm that we never rule out sanctions or other designations on any individual entity; I hope that reassures my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith).

Tim Loughton: I waived my right to reply, but will the Minister accept a challenge? Everything that she has said endorses just about everything that I have said, but there are no consequences. Every time we have a debate, in every petition she answers, and in every parliamentary question that she responds to, the answer is, "We are keeping it under review." What will it take for the British Government to shift from "keeping it under review" to "We have had enough. We will sanction these Chinese individuals, just as the US and other countries have done—and we had a particular duty to do that long before now"?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I absolutely hear my hon. Friend's point, but I will continue to reiterate that line, for very good reason. I hope that we can, as we have many times before, discuss in the Lobby the practical reasons for that. We will continue to do that, and nothing is off the table.

Jimmy Lai's name has been raised many times today. That extraordinary prominent publisher and journalist, an incredibly brave man, is on trial accused of foreign collusion and sedition under the national security law, which we have repeatedly called to be repealed. Mr Lai has been targeted in a clear attempt to stop him peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression and association. He is a British national, and the UK Government stand alongside him at this difficult time. I know that colleagues are frustrated by the Chinese refusal to accept Jimmy's British nationality due to China's own nationality legislation; it is not alone in that. As my hon. Friend has said, that does not stop my officials continuing to demand consular

rights for Jimmy in prison. The Foreign Secretary has called on the Hong Kong authorities to end the prosecution, and to release Mr Lai. We will continue to press for that.

Catherine West: I am very pleased, as I am sure other Members are, about the change of heart and language on the citizenship question. What assessment has the Minister personally made of the Prime Minister's role in this? We have won the battle with the Foreign Secretary; what about the Prime Minister?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I thank the shadow Minister for her question, but I do not speak for the Prime Minister. I think it was made clear in the Foreign Secretary's comments a few weeks ago—he had the opportunity to meet Sebastien Lai shortly after he took up his post—that our commitment and continuing resolve will continue.

On the ongoing trial, as Members have mentioned, British and other foreign nationals have been named in the prosecution. That is unacceptable, and we have made clear to the Chinese authorities, through officials in the UK, our concern that British nationals, including the former British consul-general to Hong Kong, Andrew Heyn, have been named in the prosecution. British nationals named—they have been highlighted already—include Lord Alton, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), Ben Rogers, Luke de Pulford, Bill Browder and Andy Heyn; they have all been listed in various forms. I recently met a number of those people, who are bravely speaking out on freedom of speech and human rights concerns, despite threats against them. We continue to work with them and support them. In my private conversations with them, I continue to share the message about the support that the UK Government can provide, as they may need it.

Since the trial began, our diplomats in Hong Kong have attended Mr Lai's court proceedings daily, and will continue to do so. As noted in our latest six-monthly report, Hong Kong's legal and judicial systems are at a critical juncture. The courts are having to adjudicate on an opaque law that we think should be repealed, and which places the authority of the Chief Executive above that of the courts on security matters. Hong Kong's national security trials are dominating current perceptions of Hong Kong. They are damaging the city's international reputation and status as a financial centre. Thousands who were arrested during the protests in 2019 are still waiting to learn if they will face trial. We urge the authorities to provide certainty to those individuals.

Last year, we saw a new pattern of behaviour emerging: arrest warrants were issued and bounties were placed on individuals based overseas, as a number of colleagues have mentioned. We have been clear that we will not tolerate any attempts to intimidate, harass or harm individuals or communities in the UK. That is a threat to our democracy and to our fundamental human rights. We formally demarched the Chinese ambassador in July 2023, following that first wave, and we have continued to raise the issue at senior level with Chinese and Hong Kong officials. Let me be clear: the national security law has no extraterritorial authority in the UK. The UK has no active extradition agreement with Hong Kong or China. This Government will always protect the right of individuals peacefully to exercise freedom of speech. We will provide police support if individuals have particular concerns.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green raised questions about Interpol and an early warning system around extradition issues. I will take that away to discuss more fully with Ministers across Government, but I can confirm that the UK Government take any misuse of Interpol very seriously. Article 3 of Interpol's constitution forbids the organisation from making any intervention or undertaking activities of a political, military, religious or racial character. I hope that gives a little reassurance in the meantime.

Conscious of time, I will pick up on the point made by the shadow Minister and others about the universal periodic review of China, which is, as they say, ongoing. I will put on record the statement the UK has made, thanking colleagues for taking note. It was important to us that we set out clearly the issues of concern.

There were four calls: cease the persecution and arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and Tibetans, allow genuine freedom of religion or belief and cultural expression, without fear of surveillance, torture, forced labour or sexual violence, and implement the recommendations on Xinjiang by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; guarantee an impartial judiciary and cease the harassment of lawyers, the use of the death penalty and residential surveillance in a designated location; cease the restriction of civil society and independent media, end forced repatriations, and stop targeting human rights defenders; and repeal the law on safeguarding national security in Hong Kong, as recommended by the UN, and cease prosecutions, including of Jimmy Lai.

To conclude, we will continue to stand against the deterioration of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong. There is a reputational cost to China undermining international values, as it is doing. We are clear that it must protect what remains of Hong Kong's unique social and political character, as well as its distinct economic system. We must see the repeal of the national security law, the ending of the prosecution of all individuals charged under it, and the restoration of the rights and freedoms promised to the people of Hong Kong under the Sino-British declaration.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Mr Loughton, you do have some time, if you want to wind up.

3.58 pm

Tim Loughton: I would never let a minute go to waste, Mr Twigg. I thank everybody for taking part in the debate. There has been a great degree of cross-party consensus, because we all recognise the situation as an international outrage. All I can say is that a regime that has no time for the judgment or endorsement that democratic processes bring, for the scrutiny that a free press provides, or for the rigour that adherence to the rule of international law instils, is not a strong regime. It is weak, insecure, illegitimate and in denial. That is the case of the Chinese Government. We must not be in denial in this House, and this Government must not be, either. We should follow the example of the United States and others, and work with the international community to not just call out China, but convince it that there can and will be consequences if it continues this affront to liberty and freedom in Hong Kong, in the rest of China, and beyond.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Civil Nuclear Road Map and Wylfa

[Relevant documents: Third Report of the Welsh Affairs Committee of Session 2022-23, Nuclear energy in Wales, HC 240, and the Government response, HC 1656.]

4 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I will call Virginia Crosbie to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the civil nuclear roadmap and Wylfa.

It is an absolute privilege to speak in this debate on the civil nuclear road map and Wylfa. I secured this debate to highlight the simple truth that large-scale nuclear development at Wylfa in my constituency of Ynys Môn would be a transformational opportunity for the people I represent. It would be the largest inward investment in the history of Wales, and potentially the greatest single action the UK could take in the fight against climate change and in the race for energy security.

I warmly welcome the civil nuclear road map that the UK Government published recently, in which they committed to exploring a third gigawatt-scale project after Sizewell C, and to developing further large-scale nuclear in parallel with small module reactors. I urge the Government to take that commitment further by naming Wylfa as the site for such a large-scale project, and to move forward at speed in announcing a partner to deliver that project in Ynys Môn. I am in no doubt, and neither is the nuclear industry, that Wylfa is the best site in the UK—and indeed all of Europe—for new large-scale nuclear.

I was recently visited by a delegation from Korea. That country has 24 GW of nuclear capacity, and the delegation said that Wylfa was a better site for new nuclear than any site they have. Why is that? Well, we have an existing strong connection to the national grid, we have solid bedrock—ideal for pouring the foundations of a nuclear power station—and we have plentiful cooling water that is deep, cold and close, which is exactly what the engineers need. We also have a site that has been substantially cleared and prepared for large-scale construction by Horizon Nuclear Power, under Hitachi. The industry opinion is unanimous: a third large-scale project must be at Wylfa, and I hope the Government will listen to that advice. Will the Minister commit today, or in the coming weeks, to naming Wylfa as the site for a further large-scale project?

There is one more factor that makes Wylfa ideal for new nuclear, and that is the strong support of the local community. Wylfa means hope—the community remembers what the island was like when the original Wylfa was up and running. To them, nuclear means jobs, investment and opportunity for them, their children, and their Welsh language—for all the young people who otherwise leave the island to find good work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am very impressed by the hon. Lady's bringing forward this debate. From the beginning, she has been very assiduous in the House on this issue. My knowledge of her dates from her first

debate in this House, which I think had a similar focus and title. I envy her for having a nuclear site where she wants it. We wish to have the same in Northern Ireland, but it is not possible. Does the hon. Lady agree that jobs should be created right across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that we should all benefit from manufacturing, jobs and apprenticeships?

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He is absolutely correct. This is a UK-wide endeavour, and it means jobs not only on Anglesey but across north Wales and the whole of the UK. If we do not work together on this, we cannot work to deliver net zero by 2050.

The support of my constituents is indispensable, but it cannot be taken for granted. They have had their hopes raised and dashed again and again. They have endured so much heartbreak and disappointment as successive attempts to get the project off the ground have failed. The civil nuclear road map will have raised their hopes one more time, and I beg the Minister and the Government to do everything they can to ensure that those hopes at last begin to be fulfilled. What can the Minister do to fulfil them? As I have said, we can start by naming Wylfa as the site for a further large-scale project. We should also get the land off Hitachi, and the intellectual property from the Horizon project and into the hands of Great British Nuclear. I will put it simply: the land is designated for new nuclear development. If Hitachi will not use it, it should lose it.

I urge the Minister and the Government to think creatively about what we can do. As I understand it, EDF in the last year has paid £200 million from its nuclear fleet to the Government through the electricity windfall tax. Urenco usually pays an annual dividend to the Government of around £100 million from its uranium enrichment activities. Could that money not be used to buy out Hitachi, get the Horizon intellectual property and get on with the project at Wylfa?

As the Minister will know, I met, invited and personally showed around the leading contenders for a large-scale project at Wylfa: Westinghouse, KEPCO and hopefully EDF. All have said that the work Horizon has done to prepare the site and design a plant would cut the deployment time for a large-scale project at the site. We know that time is money, so getting the land and intellectual property into UK ownership is critical. The next thing is to design and start a process this year to pick up one of those prospective partners to execute a project at Wylfa in conjunction with Great British Nuclear. That can and should be done very quickly.

Westinghouse, KEPCO and EDF are all very well known internationally. They all have large-scale designs in commercial operation that the Government and our regulators can visit. The companies' records are out there for people to see and scrutinise. Indeed, our friends in Poland have just gone through an extensive process to choose from those three for their first large-scale plant. The Czech Republic has done the same and the Dutch have started the same process. Can the Minister therefore set out how he and the Government can work with our allies?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): My hon. Friend's enthusiasm for Wylfa is absolutely infectious, although there may be a little bit of competition

for a gigawatt power station from Oldbury or Berkeley. That aside, through my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to get on with the nuclear road map, because come 2030, with the demise of the advanced gas-cooled reactors, we will have a dip in nuclear power. Will he particularly consider that we might be able to get small modular reactors and advanced modular reactors online quicker than a new gigawatt power station?

Virginia Crosbie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his excellent and timely intervention. We produce 6 GW of electricity from nuclear, and all but one of our nuclear reactors are going offline in the next decade. If we are to achieve 24 GW of electricity from nuclear by 2050, we need gigawatts, we need SMRs and AMRs, and we need to all work together to deliver to that timetable.

Can the Minister set out how he and the Government can work with our allies to get the advice and information needed to accelerate our process? We can start out with a pretty clear idea of what we want from any tendering process: a partner to lead construction of a multi-reactor, large-scale plant at Wylfa as quickly, cheaply and reliably as possible.

I really believe that the work can and should start immediately, and that it does not need to wait for a final investment decision on Sizewell C. FID on Sizewell C is vital, and I hope that that investment can be achieved as quickly and smoothly as possible. It is essential for the future of nuclear in the UK, and it is essential that we invest now in the skills needed. However, that is a different kind of work, involving different people in Government, from the task of selecting a partner for our next large-scale project.

I do not want to hide from the last point. The UK Government should be preparing to take an equity stake—at least 20% or 25%—in a project such as Wylfa. That investment would be worth several billion pounds over construction, but it would be excellent value for money. I am confident that we will get equity investment for that from our potential large-scale partners, and that could give other private sector investors the confidence to invest. Critically, the investment would give the local community the confidence that its hopes will not be dashed again, and that the UK Government—unlike the Welsh Government in Cardiff, who have cancelled plans for a third bridge—are backing the people of north-west Wales.

Think about what we would secure. We would secure billions of pounds of investment in Anglesey, north Wales and the whole Welsh supply chain. Hinkley C has already benefited the south-west by more than £5 billion to date, and a project at Wylfa would be on a similar scale. We would secure 9,000 jobs, probably more on site during construction and tens of thousands more in the supply chain. Those will be well-paid, skilled jobs that would bring people back to Ynys Môn to stay and to settle: well-paid and skilled jobs so people could build families and preserve the Welsh heritage and language, which are at the heart of the island's identity. We would generate more clean, reliable, sovereign power for all of Wales, which is worth about £2 billion in today's money, for 80 years. That is with two reactors, but the site can fit four, so we could do twice as much. We would sustain nearly 1,000 jobs in operations on that site for four generations, which would bring tens of millions of pounds directly into the local economy for

the rest of this century and beyond. We would provide a base of employment and demand to help other businesses on our energy island to thrive.

Wylfa is the cheapest option in the medium and long term. The expert modelling and the Government's modelling show that the cheapest electricity system has 24 GW and perhaps more in it. We know very well and very painfully from the last two or three years that if we do not invest in nuclear and our energy supply is insecure, everything is more expensive and our economy is exposed to the shocks and whims of forces beyond our control.

Finally, investing in large-scale nuclear at Wylfa is about Ynys Môn again having control of its future. It is about our community providing opportunities for families and young people to stay and grow, and preserving its unique character. It is about the UK having control of its energy security and its net zero future. Only nuclear provides the jobs and the clean, reliable, proven British power all in one package, and Wylfa is the best place to get it done. Diolch yn fawr.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Andrew Bowie): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie)—she is, indeed, a friend—on securing this incredibly important debate. It is important not just for her constituency, which she champions unrelentingly on every possible occasion, as indeed she does the nuclear industry, but for the future direction of travel for the nuclear industry and civil nuclear in this country.

My hon. Friend has a formidable track record of championing the case for a future nuclear project at Wylfa, both as chair of the nuclear delivery group and through her membership of the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill Committee. She has hosted numerous visits to the site for industry and Government representatives, including Katy Huff, whom I met in Dubai at COP28. She is the assistant secretary for the US Office of Nuclear Energy, and she was waxing lyrical about her visit to the site. She described her site tour with my hon. Friend as a must for anyone visiting Wales.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss our nuclear plans and Wylfa in more detail today. I reiterate the Government's determination to ensure that nuclear plays a central role in our future energy mix. As part of a massive investment in home-produced clean energy, nuclear will offer the reliable and resilient power we need to reach net zero by 2050 and strengthen our energy security so that we are never again dependent on the likes of Vladimir Putin for our energy. That is why, just last week, we announced the biggest expansion of UK nuclear power for 70 years—I confirm to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) that we are indeed getting on with it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn and other Members for the support they have offered to that programme. We will build up to 24 GW of nuclear power by 2050, which will quadruple our current capacity and allow us to meet up to a quarter of projected electricity demand.

The civil nuclear road map sets out how we will get there, including our intention to explore a further gigawatt-scale project after Sizewell C and plans to roll out advanced and small modular reactors, which are part of

[*Andrew Bowie*]

our commitment to making investment decisions on 3 to 7 GW every five years between 2030 and 2044. The road map also sets out the comprehensive policies for growth across the nuclear lifecycle, including a geological disposal facility, for which work is already underway to find a suitable location.

Alongside the road map, we have launched two consultations: one on a new approach to siting new nuclear power generation and another on alternative routes to market for new nuclear projects that do not need Government support. Together, those areas of work will give the industry and investors the confidence they need to deliver at speed the projects we need. That is crucial, because this Government is committed to ensuring that the UK is one of the best places in the world to invest in civil nuclear. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not in his place any more, but he pointed out that the work and the jobs that can be created in the supply chain across the entirety of the United Kingdom will mean that the benefits of new nuclear can be delivered even in places where new nuclear projects will not be built, including Northern Ireland.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech in support of nuclear but, as he knows, the Public Accounts Committee visited Sellafield the other day. Sellafield's whole operation is predicated on the eventual building of this geological disposal site, but the consultation has been very slow. Can my hon. Friend do anything to speed up that consultation?

Andrew Bowie: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. I am convinced that our approach to selecting sites for a geological disposal facility is right for the country. I hear my hon. Friend's views and share his frustration with the speed of consultations when the Government are running them. However, we need to ensure that we select the best site and that that site will be sustainable, have public support and be suitable for delivering this second-in-the-world geological disposal facility, which is what it will be once it is delivered.

I put on record my support to the officials who are running the consultation. It is not an easy consultation, and what they are embarking on is the first of its kind in this country. We are learning a lot from the Finnish example. They have just received the first payload to put into what they have described as their "hole in the ground"—their geological disposal facility. Nevertheless, I hear my hon. Friend and will take his views back to the Department to see what might be done to speed up the process and ensure that we can get this facility built in the United Kingdom as quickly and as safely as possible, which will be to the benefit of us all.

We first developed commercial nuclear power in this country 70 years ago. Since then, our decades of nuclear experience have provided a legacy of skilled workers and world-leading academic institutions as well as expertise in the whole nuclear lifecycle, from fuel production to decommissioning and radioactive waste management.

We are already speeding up our nuclear expansion. Hinkley Point C, Britain's first nuclear reactor in a generation is being built, and we are also making rapid progress on Sizewell C. Just last week, I was happy to move the development consent order and hold the

spade that will cut the first turf on the Sizewell C site in the next few weeks. Together, those two plants will generate enough zero-carbon power for 12 million homes, reducing our reliance on imported energy and supporting the shift to net zero. At the same time, our aim to announce the outcome of Great British Nuclear's SMR technology selection competition this year will make it the fastest competition of its kind in the world. And so I reiterate: we are getting on with it.

With regards to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn made about engaging with our international partners, I got off a call with my counterpart in the Government of the Czech Republic just a few hours ago, and I am engaging with counterparts across the world who are looking at what we are doing on our SMR down selection and our wider nuclear road map with envy. They are looking to copy, to the extent they can, the processes that we are undertaking in this country, so that they too can build their civil nuclear capacity, generate enough nuclear power to be energy-independent and reach their net zero objectives, which, of course, is good for the entire world.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn set out, Wales has a crucial and pivotal role to play in our future nuclear programme. That is not only because of its long and proud history of nuclear skills and expertise, but its growing interest in building on that rich history and its recognition that nuclear development could have a major economic impact across north Wales in particular.

We know that nuclear developments can have a profound impact on a region's economic prospects, ensuring that communities directly benefit from investment by delivering high-paid and secure jobs in many places where they are in desperately short supply. As such, we have a strong relationship with the Welsh Government and local communities. For example, the Anglesey energy island forum, co-chaired by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, has supported a positive and constructive dialogue that brings the different levels of government together. There is particularly strong interest in and support for nuclear power at the Wylfa site in north Wales. The Prime Minister himself has said that Wylfa is a strong site for new nuclear. Although he stressed that no decisions have been made on individual sites, he said that it remains a strong and good candidate—one of several sites that could host nuclear projects in the future.

I will finish by focusing on the crucial point: after several decades of decline, the UK's nuclear industry is reawakening, and we are determined to harness our unique strengths and become a leading nuclear energy nation once again. The roadmap that we published just two weeks ago will help us get there by providing direction for future decisions and strengthening ties with those who know the industry best—our nuclear workers and industry leaders across the UK, including in Wales and at Wylfa. Crucially, it will allow us to explore all the options and make sure that we spark a nuclear revival that benefits the entirety of the UK, including Wales. I look forward to continuing to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn as our plans progress in the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

School Attendance

4.30 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered school attendance.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, and thank you for giving us the opportunity to discuss school attendance in this Chamber. I note that a very similar debate is happening in the main Chamber—excuse me for having run from there to here. I understand that that is an extremely unusual occurrence, and Mr Deputy Speaker could not reflect on a time in 21 years when two debates on an identical issue had been tabled in both Chambers at once. Mine was tabled first!

A great deal has been written about school attendance recently. People are right to be concerned, with the number of severely absent or persistently absent pupils having soared since the pandemic. Last spring, nearly 1.5 million children were persistently absent from school, which means that nearly one in five children is missing 10% or more of their school time—the equivalent to an afternoon or more of every week of school. Education is key to giving young people access to skills and opportunities in their future, and the sudden surge in persistent and severe absences risks a profound impact on educational attainment and longer-term outcomes. That is why, before Christmas, I tabled a Bill to tackle the issue.

We should be extraordinarily proud of our nation's young people. Children in England now rank 11th in the world for maths and 13th for reading. Back in 2010, when today's school leavers were just starting out in reception, the same league tables placed that cohort of children 27th for maths and 25th for reading. There has been phenomenal progress in children's school journeys over those 14 years, and we must not let that slip.

The reasons for increased levels of pupil absence are multiple and complex. They include issues such as support for those with special educational needs and disabilities, anxiety and mental health. We know, for example, that if a child's SEND needs are unmet, that can lead to them missing out on education. I am also concerned about the rise in children being put on part-time timetables, especially children with SEND who may not yet have an education, health and care plan—part-time timetables should be used only for a very short time and in exceptional circumstances.

Changes in attitudes towards minor ailments may be another driving force behind school absences. Parents are now more likely to keep their children at home for minor illnesses such as coughs and colds than before the pandemic. In most cases, children are better off in school, including when they have minor ailments. There may be other changing societal issues. For example, a mental health services provider in my constituency suggested to me that increasingly addictive online gaming is impacting negatively on mental health and resulting in more of the children and young people they see missing out on school. I would like to see more research on that to see whether those societal issues are also driving some of the change.

For the most vulnerable pupils, regular attendance is also an important protective factor. Research shows that regular absence from school can expose young

people to other harms, such as being drawn into crime or serious violence. The Education Committee heard that children missing out on school was one of the biggest risk factors in cases of child exploitation. These are yet more reasons why we must find new ways to bring those who are missing out back to school and ensure that young people turn up to class.

Every parent has a legal responsibility to ensure that their child receives an education. If they decide to have their child registered at school, they have a legal duty to ensure their child attends that school regularly. However, in addressing the issue of school attendance, it is important that we do not simply lay the blame at the door of hard-working parents. Most parents want their children to do well, but many need help to support their children to fulfil those aspirations. Securing good attendance requires a holistic approach—an approach that brings together schools, families, the local authority and other local partners.

Much detailed work has already been undertaken. In 2022, following a detailed consultation, the Department for Education published new guidance entitled, "Working together to improve school attendance". Running to more than 60 pages, it is extremely detailed, with a great deal of emphasis placed on early help and multidisciplinary support. It requires every school to have a senior member of the school's leadership team acting as an attendance champion and sets out how schools and other partners should work together.

Last year, the Education Committee undertook a detailed inquiry on attendance. Witnesses agreed that that guidance needed to be put on a statutory footing, and that was a major recommendation of the Committee. Making it mandatory for bodies to follow that best practice is supported by the Children's Commissioner and the Centre for Social Justice, as well as the Education Committee and many other experts.

That is why, before Christmas, I presented a private Member's Bill to the House of Commons to make that happen, the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill. It will make the guidance statutory so that all schools, trusts, local authorities and other relevant local partners must follow it. The Bill will contain two clauses. The first will introduce a new general duty on local authorities to exercise their functions with a view to promoting regular attendance and reducing absence in their areas. The second will require schools of all types to have and publicise a school attendance policy. Both clauses will require all schools and local authorities to have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State. That will all be achieved by inserting two clauses into the Education Act 1996, under section 443.

Incidentally, I have given copies of the wording of that Bill to the Public Bill Office today. It will be printed overnight and will be available for Members to read tomorrow. The DFE has also told me that it will publish a revised version of the guidance ahead of the new provisions taking effect, and that the guidance will help to reduce unfairness in the amount of support available for families in different areas of the country and level up standards in areas with poorer attendance by providing consistent access to support.

Local authorities will need to provide all schools with a named point of contact for support with queries and advice. They will need to meet each school termly to discuss cases where multi-agency support is needed,

[Vicky Ford]

work with other agencies to provide that support where it is needed in cases of persistent or severe absence, use their services and levers to remove common causes of absence in their areas, and monitor and improve the attendance of children with a social worker.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady for bringing forward this important subject for debate. I know that there could be no better person than the Minister to answer the points that she is putting forward. Does the right hon. Lady not agree that the mixed messages over covid about learning from home have left a lot more parents either more complacent about attendance or expecting teachers to provide online learning to help their children catch up? There is no substitute for in-school learning; I think that the right hon. Lady said that, and I agree with her. Teachers cannot be expected to double their prep and delivery on behalf of those children whose parents keep them off and ask for the learning to take place on their schedule. Does the right hon. Lady agree?

Vicky Ford: I think that the important message to get to children and their families is that the best place for most children to be is in school. That is best for their education. It is best for their friendships. It is best for their development. It is best for their learning in other extracurricular activities. There is also a separate issue of home education, which I will get to shortly.

Under my Bill, which makes the guidance mandatory, schools will be expected to have an attendance champion, to have robust day-to-day processes for recording, monitoring and following up absences, to use their attendance data to prioritise the pupils and cohorts on which to focus their efforts, and to work jointly with their local authorities and other agencies where the causes of persistent and severe absence go beyond a school's remit.

The Local Government Association, for which I have great respect, has written to me in advance of the debate, saying that there is urgent need for a cross-government, child-centred strategy to tackle rising disadvantage and the wider factors that contribute towards persistent-absence children missing out on school. It says that that must include reforming the SEND system, expanding access to mental health support and youth services, connecting with hard-to-reach communities and ensuring that schools are resourced, supported and incentivised. The LGA also supports the introduction of a register of children who are out of school due to elective home education. That would improve the data on the visibility of these children so that councils can verify that children are receiving a suitable education in a safe environment.

A register of children who are out of school due to elective home education is not part of my Bill, but it is part of a Bill tabled before Christmas by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), who is a former Ofsted inspector and just spoke in the debate in the main Chamber. I know that Government Ministers are assisting her with the Bill; it is on the Order Paper and has been since December. It does not need to be overtaken by an Opposition day debate to table yet another Bill, because that would be confusing. We have two Bills, they are going through the House, and they are already on the Order Paper.

The Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition have written to me to point out the link between mental health and absence from school that I have mentioned. They recommend that a mental health absence code is introduced. The issue of different absence codes was also raised by the Education Committee. It is not specifically addressed by my Bill, but the Minister may wish to comment on it. In their letter, they welcomed the "laudable progress" being made in rolling out mental health support teams to many thousands of schools. They would like its funding to be guaranteed and an assurance that all schools will have access to these teams. It would be helpful if the Minister could address that in his answers to the debate.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Having been born and brought up in her early years in Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member will know of the excellent educational facilities and teaching in that part of the United Kingdom. She makes a valid point about mental health. She will know that one in eight young people in Northern Ireland experience anxiety, which is 25% higher than in the rest of the UK. Does she agree that there needs to be a focus across the United Kingdom on mental health because it is contributing to children's absence from school?

Vicky Ford: I thank the hon. Member for her comments. I remember my time in education in Northern Ireland very fondly. I was lucky to have access to a brilliant education in both state and private schools and to benefit from scholarships. I have excellent schools in my Chelmsford constituency. I commend the Government for the increase in recent years in the number of good and outstanding schools across the country.

On mental health, the Schools Minister has just explained in the main Chamber how the mental health support teams have been rolled out already to thousands of schools, and that they are working with the NHS to see that rolled out more widely. That is already in progress, and I have asked the Minister to address more of that roll-out. I know that it makes a difference, and it was a major ask from the coalitions of mental health experts who wrote to me. There is also, often, bespoke local need, such as that addressed by the amazing Kids Inspire charity in Essex, based in my constituency of Chelmsford, which does wonderful work. Part of it is funded by the voluntary sector, and part of it is state funded through grants. It does fantastic work with children who have been at risk of trauma.

I say to the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) that it breaks my heart that Stormont is not sitting. If it were, Northern Ireland would be able to make its own decisions to address the particular mental health and other health needs there.

I thank the Centre for Social Justice for all its research on the subject, and the Children's Commissioner and her team for their research and advice. As well as listening to the views of colleagues today, I have been working with the Children's Commissioner, who is helping me to host a major roundtable next week so that I can hear the views of schools, social workers, parents and other expert groups directly. That will happen before my Bill has its Second Reading on Friday 2 February. I hope that the Bill will receive cross-party support from all Members in the Chamber and that they will ensure

the same from other Members of their parties, which will enable it to pass swiftly through Second Reading and into Committee. Through that, we can make the guidance mandatory so that every school, local authority and body follow best practice. It is a positive legal step that we can take to enable children to get the support they need and help them return to school.

4.45 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) for securing the debate. I was unable to attend the Labour Opposition day debate on a similar theme, so I appreciate being able to raise my points here. School absences are a huge problem, and we all agree with that. In County Durham, there were well over 1,000 absences in the 2022-23 autumn and spring terms. That number has sharply risen since the 2016-17 autumn and spring terms, when there were under 250 absences in the county. The Labour party estimates that the number of absences will rise to well over 1,800 by the 2026-27 autumn and spring terms, which would be an increase of 377%—unless, of course, there is a change of policy or, better yet, a change of Government.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that we need a coherent strategy for tackling persistent absence, which includes a new register for home schooling, to keep track of these absent pupils?

Mary Kelly Foy: I absolutely agree. All children, whether they are in mainstream schooling or not, deserve to have the same importance placed on their education and their life chances. In Durham, we are blessed with incredible educators, and I must mention Mr Byers of Framwellgate School Durham, who publicly shared his recent letter to families highlighting the importance of good attendance. Mr Byers also encouraged families to reach out for support if they were struggling with their children. We must remember that support is key to ensuring that children achieve all that they are capable of, and I will miss Mr Byers's supportive attitude when he sadly leaves Fram School in the near future.

It would be remiss of me not to mention St Leonard's Catholic School in my constituency, and I am sure that Members will appreciate that my constituents, especially those affected at St Leonard's, will want me to use all available opportunities to raise what their children are going through—after all, that is what they sent me here to do when they elected me in 2019. St Leonard's was ordered to close just days before the autumn term began last year because of the presence of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. According to the Government's own figures, pupils at St Leonard's only moved back to full-face education learning at the end of November. Before that, they were in a mix of face-to-face and remote arrangements, and for almost two weeks in fully remote learning.

I want to focus on that because, for the weeks that pupils were not in school, they were unable to socialise or receive a face-to-face education, and they were placed in a topsy-turvy arrangement of being taught remotely and then off site. Their education was severely disrupted and it still is—they are being taught in inadequate settings. I would wager that the disastrous impact of

RAAC is not too dissimilar to the effect of chronic absences. Absences can severely affect a pupil's future opportunities—just look at the situation at St Leonard's—and the Department for Education has not offered any dispensations. In fact, Durham University said the following in a report released last week:

“No policy has yet been devised to protect the results of the exam cohorts most affected. It is not clear why”.

My first question is this: why has a policy not been written up? In a letter that I sent to the Department for Education in October, I suggested an amendment to the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 to give the Secretary of State the powers to give dispensations where appropriate. Why not start with that? I cannot be more emphatic about this point: parents, teachers and pupils are extremely worried that pupils will not be able to achieve their dream of getting into the university of their choice because the Government have not offered to help them. When will the Government offer to help them?

With the crisis in St Leonard's school, we can see how other injustices, such as the situation with Royal Mail, have been able to run away with themselves in this place. Government Ministers, such as the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), could have solved that problem; they could have brought justice for those affected. Instead, there was inaction and indifference. What are the consequences? The people out there—the people who we are supposed to serve—are left all the worse off. I will not allow that to happen to my constituents.

4.50 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Mr Twigg, I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) not only on securing this debate but on her excellent speech.

I attended the SEND Reform England event last week, which was a great opportunity to speak to specialists in the area. Its manifesto, which was circulated at the event, says that 24% of identified SEND pupils have an education, health and care plan, or EHCP, which meant 390,000 pupils in 2023. Additionally, it reports that 97% of school leaders think that funding for all SEND pupils is insufficient and 95% think that funding is insufficient for pupils with an EHCP.

During the covid period, I had weekly online meetings with county leaders and my fellow Gloucestershire MPs in which the challenges facing schools were often discussed. There was huge concern about some students dropping out of the system, not engaging with online learning through the lockdown period and not returning to schools when they fully reopened.

The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) referred to a school in her constituency being closed through RAAC, which I sympathise with. Of course that situation—of school closure—applied to pupils across the entire United Kingdom when their schools were closed during covid, so I think we are all very familiar with the effects of schools being closed. Nevertheless, as I say, I sympathise with what happened in that school.

The overall absence rate for primary and secondary schools in Gloucestershire during the autumn term of 2022-23 was 7.3%. That compares with a 6.6% absence

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

rate for the autumn term of 2021. Before the pandemic, the rate was consistently below 5%. This pattern of increased absence since the pandemic can be seen in national, statistical neighbour, and south-west groupings. According to the Government website, across England in both the autumn and spring terms of 2022-23, the overall absence rate was 7.3%, with 21.2% of pupils being persistently absent across those terms, meaning that they missed 10% of sessions or more—an exceptionally high percentage of students missing classes.

I, too, listened to the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), addressing the Chamber. He made the point that the data for persistent absenteeism will be published this Thursday. We do not know what that data will show; hopefully, it will show an improved situation.

Of course, pupils being persistently absent from school has a huge impact on their academic success, with just 11.3% of severely absent pupils achieving grades 9 to 4-4 being the pass grade—in English and maths, compared with 67.6% of all pupils. Although we cannot look totally at statistics in this debate, we can look at the social and mental impact of absenteeism on these pupils. As other Members, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford, have already said, I believe that being persistently absent from school will have similarly negative impacts on other aspects of a young person's life.

I totally agree not only with what my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools said in the main Chamber, but with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford. School is the best place to be to learn. For social development, for making friendships, and for overall physical development, it is much better that children are in school, rather than being absent.

During covid, I saw a considerable increase in casework on this issue, which sadly has continued in the years since. I am talking about parents getting in touch with me about children who are long-term absent from school, and asking me to help them to engage with schools on how to move forward with their children's education. Those cases were usually exacerbated by complex mental health issues and educational needs that made regular attendance more challenging. In liaising with parents and schools, it became clear that the relationship had completely broken down in many cases, with the students being the ones to ultimately suffer. Teachers were being overextended on what they could achieve. Understandably, with the pressures of trying to teach during lockdowns, they simply did not have the capacity to provide the extensive support needed by some pupils, while parents felt overwhelmed in dealing with their children's educational needs without support.

Ultimately, as my right hon. Friend said, the legal responsibility for pupils attending school falls on the parents. Unfortunately, because of often complicated socioeconomic factors and individual family challenges, a considerable number of families are simply unable or unwilling to engage fully with their children's educational needs. We should not allow those children to fall out of the education system. I agree with my right hon. Friend and others and, indeed, the Minister for Schools, who said in the main Chamber that we should have a compulsory register for home education, so that we can see whether

children are being educated at home or whether they are absent from school, and then we can take the necessary measures to do something about it.

Growing demand for mental health services and SEND support centres creates additional pressure, compounding a problem that became far worse during the lockdown period. The Education Committee examined this problem, launching its inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils in January 2023. Another report, published in September, made a number of recommendations, including a review and possible abolition of fines, which it found made little or no impact on long-term absenteeism, the urgent need to improve school-level attendance monitoring, and the need for investment in SEND and child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—which it concluded are significant factors in the attendance crisis.

The Government are increasing the direct support offered to children and their families with the expansion of the attendance mentor pilot programme. With an investment of up to £15 million over three years, that programme will provide direct, intensive support to more than 10,000 persistent and severely absent pupils and their families. I think that the Minister for Schools said in the main Chamber where it is being expanded to, and I am pretty sure that I heard that it is expanding to the area of the hon. Member for City of Durham, but she will no doubt correct me if that is wrong.

The Government have also produced a toolkit for schools, providing tips and evidence-based, adaptable templates for communicating with parents and carers, as well as the plan announced last year to expand attendance hubs, delivering 18 new hubs. This is a knowledge and practice-exchange initiative, taking the lead from those schools with excellent attendance records to introduce engagement initiatives such as breakfast clubs and extracurricular activities or to improve an individual school's attendance data. I have just listened to the Minister for Schools outline a compendium of measures to help pupils to return to school.

On a county level—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes.

4.58 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

5.13 pm

On resuming—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): The debate may continue until 5.45 pm.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful for your forbearance, Mr Twigg, given the debate in the main Chamber, and I am delighted to be able to resume my speech.

Just to quickly recap the last bit of my speech, before we had to suspend the sitting I was praising the Government for their attendance monitoring pilot programmes and particularly for delivering 18 new attendance hubs, which are doing much of what the private Member's Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) aims to do, disseminating best

practice among all the agencies, and teachers and parents—everybody involved—to try and deal with the problem of absenteeism. I therefore wholly support her Bill.

At county level, Gloucestershire County Council provides support, advice and guidance for schools through the team of inclusion officers. This includes a specialist attendance officer who can support more targeted intervention work where needed. Leveraging technology to improve engagement and accessibility is also essential. Online learning platforms, digital resources and interactive teaching methods can cater to diverse learning styles and help to ensure that students remain connected to their studies, even in challenging circumstances that prevent them from attending in person.

As I and so many others have said, it is vital we do not allow students to be left behind. Regardless of how complex the reasons for long-term absence on an individual level, all children deserve a chance to have the educational, social and physical opportunities that schools have to offer. From my constituency cases, it is clear that many parents need the additional support of schools and others to assist with their children staying in education. By investing in early intervention, mental health support, addressing socioeconomic disparities and embracing technological advancements, we can all work towards creating an education system that is inclusive, supportive and ensures that every child has the opportunity to realise their full potential.

On Friday, I visited Andoversford Primary School in my constituency to speak to the headteacher about the challenges facing the school. It was an excellent visit and a good chance to speak to teachers, pupils and parents. While the Government have announced record funding for schools, with The Cotswolds in particular set to benefit from an increase of £1.5 million in 2024-25 compared with 2023-24, it is important to see what is happening on the ground in schools.

The headteacher I met had enough money for her basic teaching. Yet she made the point that in a small rural school, there was very little money left for the other things, such as cleaning, maintenance, the caretaker and the administrator—all the different functions any school has to fulfil—and that a small school with very limited money for overheads is particularly disadvantaged in that respect. The headteacher also made the point that concerns revolved around the number of pupils attending the school overall—there are lots of small schools in the area—and how small village schools often do not bring in enough pupil funding to cover running costs and ensure they have administrators, caretakers and cleaners.

Particularly relevant to this debate, however, the headteacher also mentioned an increase in pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, and she said how extremely difficult it is to get an EHCP statement in Gloucestershire. In fact, in the school I visited, there were no pupils with a statement at all. Although the pressure on SEND overall is there, as a country, I think there is a bit of postcode lottery in pupils being able to get statements, and we need to address that.

I look forward to what the Minister has to say. In addressing the whole problem of absenteeism, we have to work closely with the local education authorities and the Department of Health and Social Care to deal not only with pupils who do not have a statement, but with others who have severe mental health problems.

That way, we can see—with increasingly better knowledge, thank goodness—how we can help children and pupils with those complex problems.

5.17 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) on bringing this important debate and on her work in this area. I am glad to have the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Opposition.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed today. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) on the importance of support for parents who struggle with their children's attendance. She also mentioned the impact of RAAC and the disruption that is causing to children's education in her constituency. I hope she is able to meet the Minister tomorrow as planned. We heard from the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) about the impact of persistent absence on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. He also told of the impact of the lack of SEND support on attendance and the very great difficulties that that presents.

I know that everyone in the House will agree that one of the most important things we can provide to children and young people across the country is an excellent education. Education opens up the world to them, not just in terms of jobs or training but in discovering interests and passions and fulfilling their aspirations. However, we cannot give children and young people the foundation they need for later life if they are not in school. New research from the Centre for Social Justice reveals that more than one in four parents think that school is not essential every day; not one in four adults but one in four parents. That is an extremely worrying statistic.

A recent report by the Children's Commissioner found that pupils who are persistently absent in years 10 and 11 are half as likely to pass five GCSEs as their peers with good attendance records. Absence figures have reached historic levels under the Conservatives, increasing by more than 40% since 2010. The number of pupils severely absent has nearly trebled in the same period, with more than 88,000 secondary school pupils missing at least half of their education last year. School attendance should not and must not be seen as optional, or something that can be dipped in and out of. However, unfortunately for at least some parents and carers, the relationship between schools, families and the Government has broken down after years of neglect.

School attendance is one of the most urgent challenges that the Government must tackle in the education system today. The figures on school attendance have been moving in the wrong direction for years. In the 2016-17 academic year, the rate of persistent absence was 10.7%, and that has increased year on year ever since under this Government. By 2022-23, the rate stood at 21.2%—double that of just six years ago. It is unacceptable that the Government have been sitting idly by, letting the rates of persistent absence rise and giving no real thought or effort to the solutions to tackle the issue. They must start working to get children back in school, and they must start with urgency.

[Helen Hayes]

Labour has a plan to reduce persistent absence. We would introduce free breakfast clubs for every primary school pupil in England to boost attendance across the country. We know that breakfast clubs improve children's learning and development, helping to boost performance in maths and reading, but they have also been shown to improve behaviour and attendance. They not only take pressure off parents in the morning but give children a chance to play and socialise, and, importantly, make sure that no child has to start the school day hungry. We would legislate for a new register of home-schooled pupils to keep track of those not in mainstream schooling. For many children, their home is a safe and enriching learning environment, but it is right that the Government take action to ensure that if a child is not in school, local authorities are clear about where they are and what education they are receiving.

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) is not present. I know that she wished to be, but she has been in the debate in the main Chamber. Much as many of us try to be in two places at once, that is not possible. She has a piece of legislation already going through this House to legislate for a register of home-educated children. Will the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) support that legislation so that it can go through swiftly? Will she also encourage the Members of her party to support my Bill to make the best practice guidance on school attendance mandatory? I know that she will want to look at every single word of it, but it would be brilliant if she could give her support in principle because then we could do both these things now.

Helen Hayes: We agree that there should be a register of home-educated children and that there should be measures to tackle persistent absence. It is bizarre that Government Members chose to vote against the measures before the House this afternoon, which they agree with. Those measures were simply intended to accelerate the process of delivering a commitment that the Government have already made.

Vicky Ford *rose*—

Helen Hayes: I will not give way again. The right hon. Lady will also know that private Members' Bills progress if the Government give them time. It is not the Opposition who are holding up those measures, and she would do well to turn her attention to the shocking record of her own Government on this issue, which they have been allowing to slide for 14 years, and the question of why action has not been taken any sooner. If the Government allow time for the Bills to be debated, the Opposition will support the measures with which we agree. Frankly, that is a matter for the Government. The right hon. Lady's obsession with the Opposition's position when our position has been set out really clearly is bizarre.

Vicky Ford: Will the hon. Lady give way again?

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is not giving way.

Helen Hayes: I am going to make some progress, I am afraid. I will not give way again.

We need a comprehensive strategy for addressing the complex issue of persistent absence. Labour will empower Ofsted to review absence as part of the annual safeguarding spot checks. The outdated and dreaded Ofsted inspection regime urgently needs reforming; one-word judgments are unhelpful for parents and put unnecessary stress on teachers and other school staff. So, as part of a series of reforms to Ofsted inspections, we will introduce annual school checks covering persistent absence, among other areas.

Absence rates among children with special educational needs and disabilities are particularly high. Labour will ensure that mainstream schools are inclusive, making inclusivity part of the Ofsted inspection framework, and introducing a new annual continuing professional development entitlement for teachers that can be used to boost their expertise to teach children with SEND. Good mental health and wellbeing is also vital for school attendance, and Labour will ensure that there is mental health support available in every school and that children and young people have an open-access mental health hub in every community.

Labour will reform the curriculum to deliver a better foundation in reading, writing and maths. We will ensure that children do not miss out on music, sport, art and drama, keeping schools a happy and joyful place to be, making children want to come to school—to enjoy it, not to dread it.

Urgent action is needed now to bring down the rates of school absences. Labour's projections, using data from the Department for Education, suggest that the number of children persistently absent from school will rise to more than 2 million in 2025-26 under current trends. That is more than one in four children and young people across the country. We face a lost generation missing from Britain's schools—a tragic example of national decline under this Government. We desperately need a Government who will put children first: one who will prioritise education, as Labour did when we were last in government. Labour has a vision for education and a plan to deliver a world-class education for every child, giving schools the right tools to deliver it.

But to break down those barriers to opportunity, our children need to be in school. That is why this debate is so important, and why we need a Labour Government to tackle the problem. In the short term, it is so disappointing that the right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches failed to support the Opposition's motion this afternoon to bring forward the Children Not in School (National Register and Support) Bill in February. There is not a moment to lose to secure the future of children across the country, and we will support every effort to deliver that.

5.27 pm

The Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education (Robert Halfon): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Twigg. Thank you for your kindness earlier. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for leaving slightly early to get to the vote, as I missed a little of his otherwise excellent speech.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), my constituency neighbour in Essex—we have got Essex man and Essex woman

here today—on securing this debate. She has championed this subject and is absolutely right to do so, because we know that regular school attendance is vital for children's attainment, mental wellbeing and long-term development, and it is crucial that we have a support system in place to ensure that every child attends school every day, ready to learn and thrive.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds talked about the damage of school closures. Wearing my previous hat as Chair of the Education Committee, I spent a huge amount of my time campaigning against school closures, as I thought that everything we are talking about today, both here and in the main Chamber, would come to pass. I have to say that I was opposed significantly by not everyone, but a lot of Members on the Opposition Benches, and of course some—not all, to be fair—of the unions. I thought, at the time, that it would cause significant damage.

The attendance challenge has grown since the start of the pandemic, not only in England but around the world. There is evidence that, post pandemic, some attitudes to absence have changed. There is a greater propensity to keep a child at home with a minor illness such as a cough or a cold, and we can understand why that has happened. We must at least try and recalibrate back to where we were pre-covid, when an attendance of 95% was achieved year after year.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I fully support the idea behind the Bill introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and indeed the complementary Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond). Will the Minister find the time to meet me to discuss specifically home schooling and how it relates to absenteeism on the Isle of Wight, where we have over three times the national average of home-schooled kids? While I absolutely respect the rights of responsible parents, I worry that especially after covid, some of those home-schooled kids are simply absentee kids from school who are not learning, and who are drifting into isolation, mental health problems or criminality.

Robert Halfon: As always, my hon. Friend makes powerful points. I think he speaks not just for some—and I stress some—younger people in his constituency, but also for those across the country. I am not the Schools Minister or the Children's Minister—I am standing in because of the debate in the main Chamber—but I will mention what my hon. Friend has requested, and I will ask for a meeting with the Schools Minister or the Children's Minister to discuss the important issues that he has raised.

Contrary to what has been suggested by the shadow Minister, we have started to see some progress, although there is a long way to go. There were 380,000 fewer pupils persistently absent or not attending school in 2022-23 than in 2021-22. Overall absence for the autumn term that has just finished was 6.8%, down from 7.5% in Autumn 2022. That means that, on average, pupils in England are attending school for the equivalent of around a day and a half more across an academic year than they did last year.

It is difficult to make direct comparisons, but we know that absenteeism is a problem not just in the UK, but in other parts of the world too. However, there are

signs that our approach is bearing fruit. I mentioned that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford is my constituency neighbour. Absence rates for Essex are very much in line with those of England as a whole, and they mirror the improvements seen nationally in the most recent terms.

We are committed to working with schools and local authorities to drive up attendance rates, and we have a six-point plan to deal with some of the problems. We have set out stronger expectations of the system, including requiring schools to have an attendance policy, appointing attendance champions and expecting local authorities to hold termly meetings with schools to agree individual plans for at-risk children.

We have established an alliance of national leaders from education, children's social care and allied services to work together to raise school attendance and reduce persistent absence, and the Attendance Action Alliance has pledged to take a range of actions to remove barriers preventing children attending school. The attendance data tool allows early intervention to avoid absences becoming entrenched, and 88% of schools are already taking part in the daily data pilot. We are committed to requiring all schools to share their daily registers as part of the programme.

We have expanded our attendance hubs, which will see almost 2,000 schools supported to tackle persistent absence—reaching around 1 million pupils. We have also launched a campaign to re-emphasise the importance of every school day, not just for learning, but for wellbeing, experiences and friendships too. From September, our attendance mentor pilot will be extended to 10 new areas. Trained mentors will work with more than 10,000 persistently and severely absent children and their families to help them back to school.

Both the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the shadow Minister rightly talked about mental health and special educational needs. We are now spending £10.5 billion on special educational needs—that is a 60% increase since 2019. The Children's Minister has a lot of work under way on this, including a plan for special educational needs which will standardise education, health and social care plans, so that we end the postcode lottery that my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds mentioned.

The hon. Member for City of Durham also asked several questions. As I understand it—I will ask the School Buildings Minister to discuss the issue that she raised—the Department for Education has contacted the Durham research team, offering to discuss the report and clarify areas of mission. We have worked closely with St Leonard's to provide additional spaces for learning and to put extra education provisions in place. All pupils at St Leonard's have been in face-to-face education since October and additional educational support is available for those pupils due to sit exams next year, with specialist facilities being sourced at other providers in the local area and transport being provided for pupils. Nevertheless, as I have already said, I will ask the School Buildings Minister to talk to her.

Mary Kelly Foy: We have had a number of meetings with Ministers. I had a meeting booked in last week with the Minister for Schools, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), which he cancelled, and it was also cancelled today, so hopefully it will go

[Mary Kelly Foy]

ahead tomorrow. However, one of the big priorities for the school is that mitigation will be put in place for the education that has been lost. It is now 18 weeks that there have been issues and those pupils doing their exams have not yet had specialist equipment for any of their coursework, so I implore the Minister to impress that upon the Minister for Schools.

Robert Halfon: I will ensure that the Schools Minister, or the School Buildings Minister, hear what the hon. Lady says; I will pass on her remarks. And I am sure that that meeting will take place.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will my right hon. Friend the Minister give way?

Robert Halfon: I want to carry on, if I may, because I only have a few minutes in which to speak and I want to respond to some of the points that have already been made. However, if I do have time to take an intervention, I will give way a bit later, if my hon. Friend will be so kind.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford referred to the School Attendance (Duties of Local Authorities and Proprietors of Schools) Bill, which she herself presented before Christmas. As she has said, that Bill will introduce two new legal duties on schools and local authorities respectively. I am grateful for her work on the Bill and welcome her contribution to the debate. I and the Government look forward to the future stages of the Bill as it progresses through the House, which she will know about, because she will have had discussions with the relevant Ministers. Those stages include Second Reading next Friday.

We absolutely remain committed to making guidance on school attendance statutory, which has already been discussed this afternoon by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford. We are exploring all avenues to do that. That is in recognition of the attendance challenge and to help ensure that local authorities and schools consistently meet the expectations made of them, under our “support first” approach.

There was also some discussion of mental health. All Members here today will be pleased to know that mental health support teams now cover almost 44% of pupils in schools and further education, and that percentage will increase to around 50% by March next year. We have also committed to offer all state schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead by 2025, which will make a huge difference. Over 14,400 schools and colleges have received a senior mental health lead training grant so far, including more than seven in 10 state-funded secondary schools in England.

As a Government, we also remain committed to introducing the statutory local authority registers for children not in school, as well as a duty for local authorities to provide support to home-educating families, which my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) mentioned in his intervention. That is to help ensure that all children receive a suitable education and are safe, regardless of where they are educated. That is the crucial point.

We warmly welcome the Children Not In School (Register) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) and await its Second Reading on 15 March. I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford for the dedication that she has shown. We will continue to work with local authorities to improve their existing non-statutory registers, and support them to ensure that all children in their area receive a suitable education. Also, the Department recently held a consultation on revised elective home education guidance for local authorities and parents, with the aim of improving consistency of practice across all local authorities. That consultation closed on 18 January and we are currently analysing the responses to it.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds also mentioned attendance mentoring and I welcome his support for what the Government are doing. We are currently delivering support in Middlesbrough, Doncaster, Knowsley, Stoke and Salford, and will expand into 10 new areas later this year to reach 10,000 children who are severely absent. Having heard me say that, I hope he will see that a lot is going on to try to resolve this very difficult problem.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; I think he has time. Will he address the problem that I mentioned at the end of my speech, which was about the liaison between local education authorities and the Department of Health and Social Care, and mental health trusts in particular? In Gloucestershire, the waiting lists for children with mental health problems are extremely long. We really need to do better by our young people.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I am sure the Minister is aware that he should leave a minute or two for the right hon. Member for Chelmsford to wind up.

Robert Halfon: Yes. I will finish in a couple of minutes. The “health” part of an education, health and care plan is fundamental. I absolutely agree that co-operation work needs to go on, and a lot of work is going on to ensure that the H part of an EHC plan does exactly as he describes.

The legacy of the pandemic means that absence levels are still too high. Improvements have been made, but there is a lot of work to do. Too many children are missing out on the opportunities that regular school attendance provides, but I reassure pupils, parents, teachers, local authorities, and health and other partners that we remain committed to working with them to tackle the issues through our “support first” approach, building on the strengths of the current system and the success that we achieved together prior to the pandemic.

Being in school has never been more valuable, with standards continuing to rise. I thank our brilliant teachers, heads and everyone who has worked with us—in Essex, in Chelmsford, in my own constituency of Harlow, in the Cotswolds, in Durham, in the Isle of Wight and in the other constituencies across the country—because the teachers and support staff are the people responsible who are doing so much to make sure that we make progress on this very difficult issue.

5.42 pm

Vicky Ford: I thank hon. Members and right hon. Members for taking part in this debate. I was very moved to hear about the situation at St Leonard's School in the City of Durham. Three schools in my constituency were affected by RAAC, and Essex County Council, working with the Department, was phenomenal. It turned around approvals really quickly and got in temporary classrooms where they were needed, so that every child in my constituency was in face-to-face learning at the beginning of this term. Essex had more RAAC schools than anywhere else, and the county council was phenomenal in turning it around. Some schools had it very badly, but they were very few; when so many kids are anxious, we need to be really careful to remember that the vast majority of children are in safe schools. I hope that the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) gets her meetings and those issues addressed.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), who spoke beautifully, especially about the impact on small rural schools. Obviously, the ones in my constituency are bigger, inner-city schools. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for taking the opportunity to mention schools on the Island, a place of which I am very fond. It is important that the issue of children missing out because they are off the school register is considered.

With regard to my private Member's Bill, I make no apology for being obsessed with making sure that children get education, or for being obsessed with doing the best I can to deal with this issue. To get the private Member's Bill through the House does not need the Government to give time; what it needs is for no Member of this place to object to it when I move it at Second Reading. Any Member could object to it, and it would then go back to the bottom of the queue. To get it through on Friday 2 February, I just need to know that no Member of this House will object to it. I know that the Government will not object to it; I have been talking to all Members on the Government side of the House to make sure that there will be no objections from our side. If the Opposition would kindly check, if possible, that there are no objections on their side—I am happy to talk to anyone who has concerns—it will enable the Bill to move swiftly.

I thank all Members for treating the issue seriously. It is a real issue, and it needs us all to work across parties to perform the No. 1 recommendation, which is to make sure that all schools and local authorities have to follow best practice. That is what the Bill will do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered school attendance.

5.44 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Petition

Tuesday 23 January 2024

OBSERVATIONS

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Proposed West of Ifield development

The petition of residents of the constituency of Crawley

Declares that proposals put forward by Homes England for up to 10,000 housing units on land to the west of Ifield are unsustainable, and would see the loss of greenfield sites and intolerable pressure on local public infrastructure

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to ensure the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities work with Homes England to ensure these proposals are withdrawn

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Henry Smith, *Official Report*, 13 December 2023; Vol. 742, c. 961.]

[P002890]

Observations from the Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley):

The Government absolutely recognise the challenges that can be associated with significant proposals for housing development and any subsequent delivery of those large-scale projects. Getting planning policy right is a difficult balance, as are the benefits and disbenefits of individual planning applications and proposals.

The Government are keen to ensure the provision of housing that supports the needs of local people and to give people the important opportunity of home ownership.

As part of that commitment, Homes England has a strategic plan to create high-quality homes across the country to fulfil those overarching aims. A copy of the agency's 2023 to 2028 strategic plan can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/homes-england-strategic-plan-2023-to-2028>.

We accept that proposals can present challenges at times and need to be weighed up in the balance as part of a planning process. On the specific West of Ifield site, this proposal is not yet a committed Homes England project, but rather one being promoted as part of the Horsham local plan process. The local authority is responsible for deciding where housing is delivered, working with neighbouring authorities, statutory consultees and local communities to ensure proposals are appropriate. This involves taking account of constraints in any individual local area.

Any development proposals brought forward by Homes England will follow a rigorous process, with the decision on their appropriateness sitting principally with the local planning authority, which will consider the suitability and acceptability of the site for development in determining whether it should form part of the local plan or not. Any applications will be determined in accordance with the local democratic process. Where sites are identified to meet housing needs, potential impacts should be fully considered both as part of the local plan site selection and as part of specific future planning applications, should the scheme be taken forward.

Given the Secretary of State's quasi-judicial role that can be exercised in individual planning applications, it would not be prudent to comment on the merits of this scheme specifically, and it is ultimately for the local authority through its plan-making process to ensure that the sites being proposed are right for the area.

I would encourage both my hon. Friend and his constituents to engage with the local plan-making process to ensure local voices are heard.

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 23 January 2024

EDUCATION

SEND Provision and Funding

The following is an extract from the Backbench Business debate on SEND Provision and Funding on Thursday 11 January 2024.

David Johnston: We have a universal SEND services programme, which more than 11,000 staff have already accessed to improve their knowledge and skills. We are also funding the training of 7,000 early years staff with a level 3 SENCO qualification, as my hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee said. Some 5,200 staff have begun that training, so we are on track with that target.

[Official Report, 11 January 2024, Vol. 743, c. 524.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Wantage (David Johnston):

An error has been identified in my speech in the debate on SEND Provision and Funding. The correct statement should have been:

David Johnston: We have a universal SEND services programme, which more than 11,000 staff have already accessed to improve their knowledge and skills. We are also funding the training of 7,000 early years staff with a level 3 SENCO qualification, as my hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee said. Some 5,200 staff have **registered for** that training, so we are on track with that target.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Voter ID: Election Turnout

The following is an extract from Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions on 22 January 2024:

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Government's voter ID requirements, which allow travel cards for older people but not the young person's equivalent, are unfair at best, but the reality is that this is political opportunism. As has just been said, analysis by the Electoral Commission following England's 2023 local elections found that 14,000 people were unable to vote due to voter ID requirements. There is real concern, based on that data, that there will be a potential impact in the forthcoming general election. Voters at local elections are often a smaller group of more politically informed people, whereas the larger group of voters who wish to cast their vote at a general election may be less aware of the requirements. Does the Minister agree with the words of his former Cabinet colleague, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), that

"Parties that try and gerrymander end up finding their clever scheme comes back to bite them, as... we found by insisting on voter ID for elections"?

Simon Hoare: I do not agree with that, and nor will I take any lessons on political opportunism from the SNP. I am tempted to say that I would WhatsApp my answer to the hon. Lady, but she would probably delete it before she read it. A lot will depend on whether the identification has the relevant hologram. I also point out to the hon. Lady that—*[Interruption.]* She chunters from a sedentary position without wanting to listen to the answer, but of the 14,000 who did not have the right identification, 7,000 came back. *[Official Report, 22 January 2024, Vol. 744, c. 8.]*

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) during Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions. The response should have been:

Simon Hoare: I do not agree with that, and nor will I take any lessons on political opportunism from the SNP. I am tempted to say that I would WhatsApp my answer to the hon. Lady, but she would probably delete it before she read it. A lot will depend on whether the identification has the relevant hologram. I also point out to the hon. Lady that—*[Interruption.]* She chunters from a sedentary position without wanting to listen to the answer, but **of the 37,000 who did not have the right identification, 14,000 did not come back.**

DEFENCE

Service Accommodation

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Service Accommodation on 19 December 2023.

James Cartlidge: As of 13 November, some 84% of rooms met the standard. That means that 13,347 did not, which falls well short of where we need to be. However, the intent is that, by April 2024, a further 30% of those will be upgraded. In the longer term, the Department will invest around £5.3 billion in SLA over the next 10 years to get homes up to standard. That will see us deliver approximately 40,000 new or refurbished bed spaces.

[Official Report, 19 December 2023, Vol. 742, c. 499WH.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Defence Procurement, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate. The correct information should have been:

James Cartlidge: As of 13 November, some 84% of rooms met the standard. That means that 13,347 did not, which falls well short of where we need to be. However, the intent is that, by April 2024, a further 30% of those will be upgraded. In the longer term, the Department will invest around **£2 billion** in SLA over the next 10 years to get homes up to standard. That will see us deliver approximately 40,000 new or refurbished bed spaces.

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